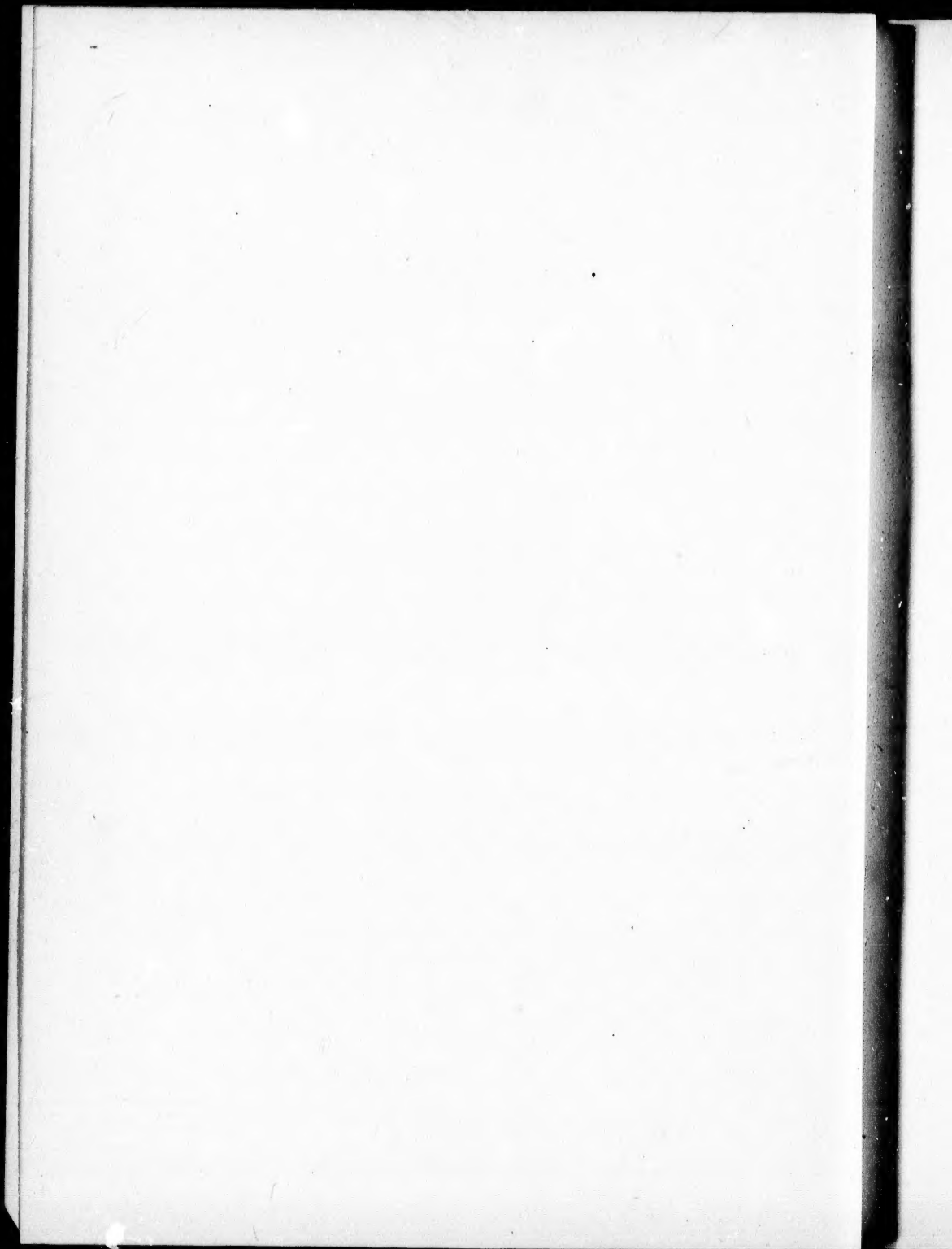




A VICTORY WON



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BY

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"A BITTER DEBT," "ELIZABETH GLEN, M.B.," "HOMESPUN,"
"A FOOLISH MARRIAGE," ETC.

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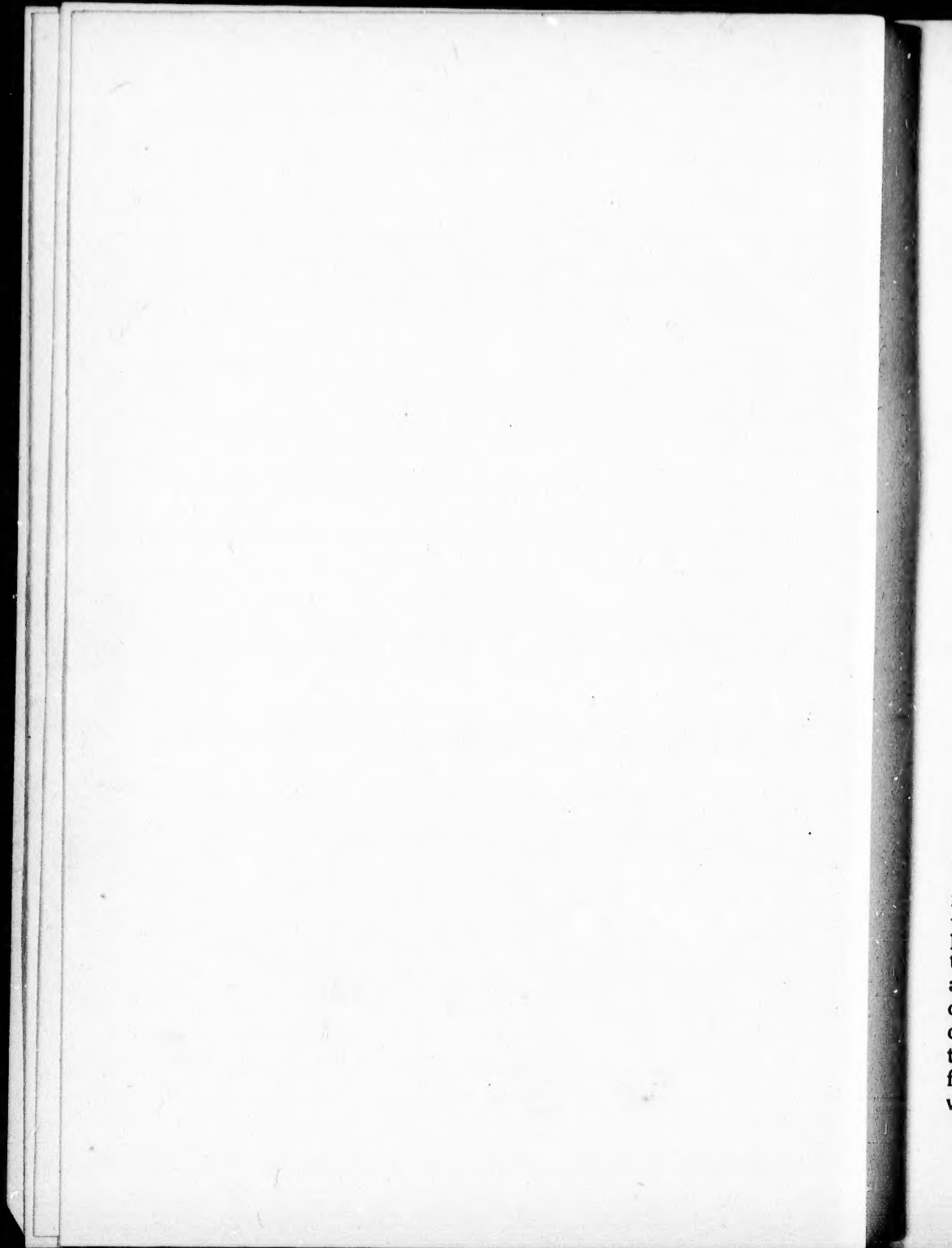
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TO
JANE BELL
MY MOTHER'S FRIEND
AND MINE.





A VICTORY WON.

CHAPTER I.

"ONLY ELEANOR TO WIN."

THE windows of the Haugh drawing-room commanded a fine view. The old house stood high, and though the demesne was richly wooded, the trees had been cleared in front in order that the sea might not be shut out. Inland the scenery was picturesque and varied, suggestive of peace and plenty; in the rich Howe of Fife the old promise that seed-time and harvest should not fail had been amply fulfilled. Farming, in spite of sundry fluctuations in the agricultural world, continued to be a lucrative, pleasant, and highly respectable calling. It pleased the Kerrs of Haugh in their humbler moments to speak of Haugh as a farm, though they had owned it and farmed it for more generations than I could here set down. A farm it certainly was in so far that fields were duly tilled around it, but the place had all the pretentiousness of a lairdship, and the mere drudgery of the farm did not come near it. The house stood in well-wooded grounds, and was approached by a fine avenue

leading from a handsome lodge. No cottage or out-building was permitted to be seen from any of the windows, and the privacy of the place was complete. The house itself was a curious structure, but decidedly picturesque. There had been a day, far remote, when Haugh had been a plain two-storied farm-house, unadorned and unpicturesque, and that old portion still formed the main building. But it had been added to from every conceivable point, and was now a great pile, all angles and gables and curious corners, the old part being distinguished by its clothing of ivy, which was shooting out kindly tendrils to soften the more modern additions. The grounds of Haugh were kept most immaculately; not a leaf was to be seen on the smooth velvet of the lawns, or a stray weed or blade of grass on the gravelled paths. The exterior of the house gave index to the careful management within. It was perfect in every detail.

The interior was modern in arrangement, with a touch of the antique here and there to remind those who looked that the Kerrs were not new—an old settle in the hall, a quaint grandfather clock on the stairs, a family portrait here and there among scenes more modern, gave the necessary touch of that respectability we associate with age. It was a beautiful home; but the house on that winter day, which is vividly before me as I write, was too still to be homelike. It was late afternoon, and the dusk was gathering. In the drawing-room the shadows were growing long and dark, and the firelight danced most gleefully upon the walls and floor. The room was handsome in style, and the tone of furnishing was good and harmonious, without being distinguished by any special beauty or originality. It was a comfortable family room, uniting great space and much comfort, a combination which is rare.

A lady sat in the window, with her arm on the broad low sill, looking out listlessly, and her face was anxious and disturbed. A low wooden seat ran round the wide square window—and upon it there lay the sheets of an

open letter written upon foreign notepaper. It was the letter, no doubt, that occupied the lady's thoughts. The scene upon which her eyes rested was striking in its way. The house, standing on its wooded height, commanded what prospect intervened between it and the sea. Beyond the stretch of fields, which were slightly powdered with a sprinkling of thin snow, there was a village sloping to the sea. It was a quaint place, curious rather than picturesque, though its straggling red roofs were not without a certain fitness to the scene. It was a fishing village which kept up its old traditions, and shunned all new things; though some had been forced upon it by the relentless march of time and circumstance. The old harbour, once the chief ferry between Fife and Edinburgh, was now unvisited even by a luggage boat, and remained as a relic of the past, or a haven to the fishers on a stormy night; while through the green braes the railway had tunnelled its way, and the train with shriek and snort disturbed the seabirds in their haunts both night and day. The tide of commerce—with its accompanying improvements—had passed by the little village fringing the bay, though its neighbour, three miles off, grew and flourished, and became a little city in its bigness and importance.

Kinghorn retained its old-world flavour, visible in the lives and ways, in the very faces of its inhabitants, to whom the homely concerns of each day were sufficient. It was as if the sea had shut them in, and they asked nothing of any man but to be let alone to live their quiet lives unmolested. So to outward appearance. Nevertheless many a homely bit of tragedy and comedy was played beneath the arching eaves of the quaint old houses, and human nature was not found robbed of its attributes though far removed from the strife of worlds.

Many and many an afternoon had Alison Kerr watched the same prospect from their windows. She knew it, ay, and loved it in all its moods. In the midst of an anxiety the most harassing, she found a

certain companionship and comfort in the wild unrest of the great grey waves, foam-crested, as they rolled on to the shore. A storm was brewing; and the wild clouds lay lowered over the opposite shore, obscuring the fair outline of the queenly city, whose marrow we who love her have never seen.

Alison Kerr, the mistress of Haugh, was a woman in her prime; a woman with no special beauty to single her out, though her face had its own sweetness and strength. It was a motherly face, and at forty-five had more lines of care upon it than were to be desired by those who loved her. In its repose it was marked by a great sadness, which betokened a heart familiar with sorrow. She took up the letter again and again, but seemed to find no solace in familiarity with its contents. It was a relief to her when a servant entered the room to light the lamps and prepare the table for tea.

"Has Mr. Kerr come home yet, Katie?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's coming up from the stables now, and there's a gentleman with him."

"Do you not know him?"

"I could not see very well, ma'am, but it looked like Mr. Allardyce."

"Bring another cup," said Mrs. Kerr, and folding up her letter, put it in her pocket.

She had somewhat banished her sad look when the two gentlemen entered the room. Her husband came first, laughing loudly, as was his wont, over some trivial joke of his own making. He was a big burly man, handsome after a somewhat rough standard—a man we would associate with stables and outdoor pursuits, but who looked out of place in a lady's drawing-room. He wore a tweed coat and riding-breeches, and his boots were adorned with the clay through which he had been tramping to a valuation of turnip fields. His face was very red, suggestive of something more than exposure to the weather, and his breath smelt of whisky. "A rough tyke," somebody had christened Alexander

Kerr of Haugh, and the designation was not inappropriate.

"Here's Allardyce, Alison; got any tea for him? Snug enough here, Allardyce, eh? Trust the women folk for making themselves comfortable on a roughish day."

He threw himself into a chair, and wheeled it up to the fire.

"Tell Kate I want a cinder in my tea, will you? Let her look sharp about it."

"How are you to-day, Robert, and is your mother well?"

Mrs. Kerr greeted the young man with a cordiality most marked, and he responded to it without stint. It was easy to see that between the mistress of Haugh and Robert Allardyce there was a very perfect understanding. He was a fine-looking young fellow, about six-and-twenty, and looked like a country squire, but had none of the coarseness which made Alexander Kerr so objectionable.

"Sit down, Robert, sit down. I have some news for you to-day, and for you, Alec—a letter from Eleanor."

"Ay, and what does Nell say?" inquired Kerr, as he spread his wet boots on the steel bars of the fender. "And when is the monkey coming home? Is not Kate bringing the whisky? I could have brewed it myself or this time."

"She is not coming home just yet—she talks of going on with those new friends of hers to Monte Carlo—and will be home, she says, in time for Christmas."

"Umph!" said Kerr, gruffly, and helped himself to a good stiff glass of whisky. "Too much gallivanting. I'll have to put my foot down—have a nip, Allardyce?"

"No, thank you. I prefer Mrs. Kerr's brew unadulterated," replied Allardyce, and went to the tea-table to get his cup.

"And there's Claud spending money by the bushel in Cheshire. Doing the lord all round. Learning estate

management, he calls it. I'd teach him more estate management in a week than he has learned in six months there. They shall both come home."

"That's good news, isn't it, Mrs. Kerr?" said Allardyce, with significance.

Mrs. Kerr merely nodded, and the maid entered at the moment, saying the gamekeeper wished specially to see Mr. Kerr.

He rose lazily, looking out of temper, the whisky and the fire making him drowsy. His wife watched him as he sauntered out of the room, and her face grew yet graver; she clasped her hands with a little sudden gesture, and looked up pathetically into the true face of Robert Allardyce.

"Oh, Robert, I am fearfully anxious about the children. I wish—I wish I had never let them away."

"Who are these people Eleanor has got so intimate with?" inquired Allardyce with eager interest.

"I can hardly tell you; their name is Brabant. I fancy they are partly French; they are related in some way to Madame Fourmin, with whom Eleanor has been staying. The mother is a widow—and has two sons. They have some property in Belgium, near Bruges, but they spend the summer months in England."

"Have the sons any occupation?"

"The younger, Adrian, is a writer. The elder, I suppose, looks after the property. They are rich, evidently, but, somehow, from all I can gather from Eleanor's letters, they are not people I care much for her to associate with."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Kerr. Probably when she comes home she will break with them. School friendships seldom last," said Allardyce, reassuringly.

"Ah, but Eleanor has never been a school-girl. She seemed to grow into a woman all at once."

Allardyce took a turn across the floor. His fine face was marked by the depth of the feeling which moved him to speech.

Presently he came back to Mrs. Kerr, and stood before her.

"Mrs. Kerr, you must, I think, be aware of my feelings towards Eleanor, that the hope of my life is to make her my wife."

Mrs. Kerr's eyes filled with tears, and she stretched out her hand impulsively to him.

"It is a hope I share. To see Eleanor your wife would relieve my mind of an anxiety which constantly oppresses it."

"Then I have your permission to speak to Eleanor?"

"Not my permission only—my blessing. I pray God that Eleanor will not wilfully pass by so great a gift—the love of a man like you."

A smile like a gleam of sunshine relieved the gravity of Allardyce's face.

"I have hope, Mrs. Kerr. We have known each other so long, and always been friends. I think she knows very well how I regard her, and she never repulsed me."

"Well, we shall see. Does your mother know of this, Robert?"

"No, but she will quite approve. You know how fond she is of you."

"She would not continue at Castlebar in the event of your marriage with Eleanor? Forgive me saying that two such strong wills would be sure to clash."

A momentary shadow flitted across the brightness of Allardyce's face.

"The house is big, and my mother would be grieved to leave Castlebar."

Mrs. Allardyce shook her head.

"There are few houses big enough to hold a man's wife and his mother. I do not think in this case it would do."

"Well, that is a matter for after consideration. It is a great thing that I have your approval. What do you think Mr. Kerr will say?"

"I am sure he will be as glad as I am. He is very fond of Eleanor, and I know would not wish her to marry

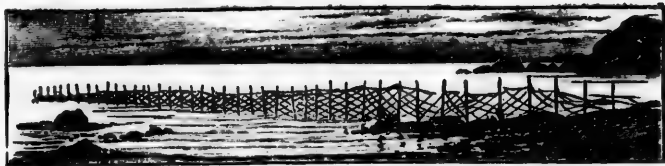
very far from Haugh—certainly not out of Scotland. I shall speak to him first."

"If you would be so kind—and then there will be only Eleanor to win."

"Only Eleanor to win," repeated Mrs. Kerr, with a faint sad smile, and the subject dropped at the entrance of her husband, who had been annoyed by his interview with the gamekeeper, and bore his annoyance on his face.



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CHAPTER II.

"THERE IS SOMEBODY ELSE."

ALLARDYCE did not linger, and when he had gone, Mr. Kerr finished his whisky in silence.

"Now, tell me what Nell's doing, Alison. You can read the letter to me if you like."

Mrs. Kerr did so, and he listened in rather an ominous silence. There was not very much in the letter after all, chiefly descriptions of the places she had visited with Madame Fourmin, the preceptress with whom she had been living for the past twelve months for the purpose of acquiring French.

"Going to Monte Carlo, is she, and then wants to fetch these new-fangled folks here? Well, what do you say?"

"I say no, most emphatically, Alec," replied Mrs. Kerr, quite decisively for her. "I wish you would go to Paris now and fetch Eleanor home."

"In the very middle of the hunting season! Not if I know it. She's all right, Alison; you can't make a molly-coddle of Nell—she's got too much spunk. I expect you'll have to give her all the rope she wants."

"She ought never to have gone to Paris. I was misled about Madame Fourmin. She appears, from all

Eleanor says of her, to be the very last person to whom one would willingly give the care of a young girl."

Kerr gave a huge laugh.

"Worry, worry, worry as usual, Alison! I wonder how long it will take you at this rate to worry down the hill to the kirkyard? What's the good of thinking about the girl—she's got to have her fling. All the Kerrs have—that's why I'm letting Claud down gently. They'll settle down by and by."

Mrs. Kerr gave a faint sigh. She had heard it all before. There was not a spark of sympathy between her husband and herself on any theme whatsoever; their ideas concerning the upbringing of children were opposite as the Poles. How a woman so gentle, so refined, so pious, came to mate with rough Kerr of Haugh, whose name was notorious in the Howe of Fife, I cannot say. That union belongs to the long category of ill-assorted marriages for which no explanation can be found. Probably his position and his wealth may have had something to do with it. Alison Kerr, if she had ever idealised her husband, was long since disillusioned. She remained with him only for the sake of the children, and because any open scandal or notoriety would be a death-blow to her, and to the reticent and haughty family to which she belonged.

"What was Allardyce saying to you as I came in? I thought the pair of you looked a bit sentimental," was his next remark.

"We were speaking of Eleanor. He wants to marry her."

Mr. Kerr gave a prolonged whistle. "Got so far as that, has he? Well, do you think it would do?"

"So far as Robert is concerned it would. If Eleanor were his wife I should have an easier mind, Alec."

"Well, I have no great objection. Castlebar is a fine little place, and Allardyce himself a decent fellow, though a bit soft. I believe Nell would lead him a dance."

"Marriage would probably tone her down a little. I hope she will regard it favourably."

"Well, we can only wait and see ; but what about the old lady? There's nothing soft about her. Castlebar is a goodish house, but hardly big enough for our Nell and Mrs. Allardyce."

"I told Robert so. He said that would be a matter for after consideration."

"So it is. What age is Nell? nineteen ; and two after her already. Willie Heron would give his right hand for a smile from her."

"Oh, that would not do at all," said Mrs. Kerr, quietly. "He is too unstable, and he has nothing to offer her."

"Except brains, which have a certain market value. He's a clever chap, though handicapped by having had a parson for a father."

"He is very unsteady, as unlike his sister as can well be. I wish our Claud would marry Mary Heron, Alec."

"You can't make 'em do it, Alison. The sooner you open your eyes to the fact the better. Mary Heron's not a bad little girl, but she's too pious for Haugh. You can't mate an eagle and a dove and expect good to come of it."

"Then what am I to say to Eleanor about those people, the Brabants? Are they to come?"

"Yes, let them come ; they'll liven us up a bit. Besides, we can see then what sort they are, and whether their acquaintance is to be desired."

"And she may go to Monte Carlo?"

"I suppose so. Don't worry me any more about the bairns, Alison. I've got enough on my mind with bad seasons and dying cattle. I want peace at home."

He flung himself out of the room rather surlily. He was often rude to his wife, for whom he had long ceased to profess any affection. At the same time, he was secretly proud of her absolute integrity, and had an innate respect even for the straitlacedness which often galled him. He was a man of ungovernable temper, and a high-spirited wife would have made terrible scenes in Haugh. Mrs. Kerr was not without spirit, and when matters of conscience were concerned she was immov-

able as a rock. But she had long learned the value of patience, the wisdom of a quiet spirit. She could hold her tongue, otherwise matters had long since reached a crisis in the house of Haugh, for Alexander Kerr was neither a faithful husband nor a just master. He was a man feared by most, beloved by few. Yet he held a prominent position in the county, and was welcomed everywhere, wealth and social standing opening the doors.

Left alone, his wife sat down to her davenport, with her daughter's letter before her. The answer took her a long time to write.

When Robert Allardyce left Haugh that afternoon he turned his face homewards, choosing the short cuts through the fields, where the frost had made good footing. It was now five o'clock; his business as a banker in the neighbouring town kept him, as a rule, till four. In summer he either drove or rode—in winter, returned by train. He was seldom absent from his mother's tea-table—spread cosily by the dining-room fire at five o'clock. Castlebar was distant from Haugh about two miles. It stood loneliness on a rocky crag above a loch, which lent its own peculiar charm to the landscape. It was a less pretentious place than Haugh, but a substantial and comfortable heritage. Allardyce, however, was but a new name in the district, Castlebar having been purchased by Allardyce's father, who had spent a small fortune on its repair and adornment. It had been his hobby, and his son now reaped the benefit, but did not throw himself heart and soul into the life of a country gentleman. He had much to occupy his thoughts that afternoon as he strode across the crisp fields, and when he came within sight of Castlebar he was conscious of a quickened interest in it, as the possible home of the woman he loved.

He saw the lights twinkling through the bare boughs of the few trees that sheltered its rocky height, and then a mental picture of what it would be to see Eleanor in the old house, to watch the smile of welcome on her face

for him. Such visions have robbed many a sober-minded man of his sober-mindedness, and made him a very schoolboy for folly. There was a kind of uplifted look on his face when he entered the house—a look his shrewd mother made a note of.

Robert Allardyce, senior, had married his housekeeper, the unpardonable sin his own connections still cherished against him. She was quite uneducated, but a woman of strong mental capacity and much common sense. And she was handsome enough to have claimed descent from any noble house. Her father was a dairy farmer in the Upper-ward of Lanarkshire, and her upbringing had been of the hardest. As she had been a faithful and capable housekeeper to Mr. Allardyce, so she made him a faithful and capable wife, and their married life had been happier than is common. Mrs. Allardyce had risen well to her new estate, and never occasioned a blush to rise in her husband's cheek; only one thing she held to, and would lay aside for no man nor woman, and that was the homely speech of her childhood. Her husband's business relations had brought him into contact with people of all degrees, and on many occasions Mrs. Allardyce had dined in aristocratic company, to whom her Scotch, unadulterated and unadorned, sounded like music—rare music they could seldom hear. She was a great favourite, and her clever, open, caustic remarks, delivered in her broad Doric, had given the flavour to many a select gathering. Mr. Allardyce had wisely made no attempt to soften any of his wife's peculiarities, and they lived in peace and contentment, and unusual happiness, to the end of his days. Between Robert Allardyce and his mother existed an attachment the most passionate; and the day of his wedding was a thing of dread to her. She never spoke of it, though she knew very well it was bound to come.

Like most mothers, she had her ambitions and hopes for her son, though she was too wise a woman to let him know where her heart's desire lay. He walked straight into the dining-room—a cosy room furnished with warm

crimson, and there found his mother, as usual, in her favourite chair.

"I hope you didn't wait for me, mother? I'm late."

"Three quarters of an hour, lad. Did anything happen the train?"

"Oh, no, I met Mr. Kerr in the town, and he wanted me up to Haugh to see the cattle—two died this morning."

"What o'?"

"Pneumonia; it's bad for him at this time of the year. Then I went into the house for a minute."

"Then ye've had your tea?"

"Yes, but I don't mind another cup," he replied, and took a sudden long look at his mother as she rose to fill his cup.

She was fifty-eight, but did not look her years. She was well preserved, and might have passed for five-and-forty. Her hair was still a rich and glossy brown, and so abundant, that it scarcely needed the adornment of the little lace cap which, nevertheless, made an admirable setting for the strong, kind, motherly face.

She had on a black satin gown, of a rich, soft make, which fell straightly about her comely figure, and moved gracefully, without noise or rustle. A handsome brooch and one or two valuable rings were fitting accompaniments of this becoming attire. Robert Allardyce may be forgiven his sudden pride in his handsome mother.

"How are they at Haugh—what fettle did ye find the Laird in?"

"A trifle cranky," said Allardyce, rather absently. "Mrs. Kerr had a letter from Eleanor."

"That's nothing by ordinar', is it? Has she no ane every week?"

"Oh, I daresay, but this was a special one. Her schooling's over, it appears, and she's going a jaunt to Monte Carlo, and then bringing home some of her foreign friends for Christmas. I can see it's not going down very well at Haugh, especially with Mrs. Kerr."

"She's a nice woman, Mrs. Kerr, but she has made

one mistake, Rob. That lassie should never hae been let awa' to foreign places her lee lane."

"Why not, mother? Hundreds of girls are so sent by their parents every year."

"Ay, but they're no a' like Eleanor Kerr. She's one that'll need bit and bridle a' her days, Rob. She's ower like Haugh himsel' to be lippeden to."

Allardyce tightened his mouth a little.

"Aren't you a little hard on her, mother? I thought you liked Eleanor."

"I never said I didna like her; but, at the same time, I ken the stock she's come frae, and she favours the Kerrs rather than the Dunlops."

Robert drank his tea in silence, ruminating rather dolefully. This was not a very promising beginning to his love affair, for which, next to Eleanor's consent, he desired his mother's approval beyond anything on earth.

"Mary Heron was here this afternoon, Rob," said she, presently.

"Was she?" he asked, with but a languid interest. "And is Mary well?"

"Fine—a fine lassie is Mary; there's few like her," she said, keeping her eye on him keenly. But he preserved a fine indifference, and she saw that his mind was full of something else.

"What was Mary saying?" he asked, presently, forcing himself to show some interest in the subject.

"Nothing very special. She thinks she has a chance with her picture in the Academy this year, through Mr. M'Adam. I am sure I hope she will get it in. There's no mony spare bawbees among the Herons, lad."

"If Willie would take and work for his mother and sister, it would be better like than to see him mooning about the braes with an casel under his arm. I've no patience with that kind of thing, mother. If a man wants to paint pictures let him do it in his leisure time; at least, until he makes a connection that will give him a living."

"There's truth in what you say, Rob. The laddie should hae been learned a trade. But that's not Mary's fault, and it's of her we were speakin'. There's few like her. Where will ye get another to do as she does, a' the wark o' the auld Manse, and earning money as well; and yet that silly Mrs. Heron is set entirely on Willie, and takes a' thing frae Mary as her due. I was wae for her this afternoon, Rob."

"It's an awful shame. I'm sorry for her, too."

"But no that sorry that ye would offer her something better, Rob?" said his mother, on the spur of the moment. He looked at her in surprise, smiled slightly, and shook his head.

"Is that what you've been driving at, mother? I like Mary very well, but as to marrying her—"

He gave his shoulders an expressive shrug.

"Where would ye find a better, Rob, tell me that?" said Mrs. Allardyce, with a most unusual eagerness.

"That may be, mother, but I am not minded to marry her."

"What for? Is there anybody else, Rob?"

Allardyce eyed his mother doubtfully, as if uncertain whether or not the moment were propitious.

"Well, there is. I want to marry Eleanor Kerr. I'm only waiting till she comes home to ask her."

The ruddy colour faded slightly out of Mrs. Allardyce's handsome face; and she turned it away hastily, for two big tears, wrung from the extreme bitterness of her heart, forced themselves from her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks.





CHAPTER III.

"I AM ANSWERED."

IN a private sitting-room of the Savoy Hotel, a lady and gentleman were trifling over an early lunch. It was a dreary day; through the straggling trees before the windows the vehicles plying on the Embankment could scarcely be discerned; the river not at all. The room was made cheerful by the soft, white electric light and the fire burning merrily in the grate. They were mother and son—stylish, even distinguished-looking people, with a foreign appearance. The lady was middle-aged, handsome, and remarkably well-dressed—the man, about five-and-twenty, very dark, and of a lithe, slight figure, which made him seem taller than he really was. They talked in French, and with an accent which betrayed no English taint, though Madame Brabant had been born, if not quite within the sound of St. Paul's, yet in the very English precincts of Woburn Square.

She seemed to be trying to impress upon her son something he was unwilling to accept, for his face wore a very doubtful, even irritated look.

"Has she any money, mother?—that is the crucial point."

"There is money; the estate is substantial. I have made inquiries, and it is quite satisfactory. Miss Kerr

will have at least twenty thousand pounds, I am reliably informed."

"It is a good *dot*, but she will be a firebrand to live with. We should certainly quarrel every day of the week, and twice on Sunday."

Madame Brabant gave her shoulders a little shrug.

"Bah! of what consequence is that? The thing is to secure the *dot*; and she is a very presentable wife, Louis, you will admit that?"

"Oh, yes, she will pass—but then there are her people—how to satisfy *le père*. He belongs to the nation who will have everything in black and white. Our name is good, but what else?"

"Leave that to me. We must all accept this invitation, except Adrian, who will spoil all the game. Some excuse must be found for him. But, tell me, do you think Eleanor herself is willing?"

Brabant lit a cigarette, and uplifted his brows to watch the first puff of smoke as it ascended.

His complacent air was delightful to behold.

"There can be no doubt of that, and you know it, Maman. It is not for your company the fair Eleanor presses this visit upon us."

Mrs. Brabant faintly smiled.

"You do not lack conceit, my son, but let it pass. What is to be the rôle, then, Louis, how to account for the estates we have spoken much of but do not possess?"

"We can say that times are hard; and, like many of the aristocracy, we cannot meantime afford to live on our lands."

"And where are our lands to be?"

"Humph, they must be at Froissart, where the only branch of the family lives who is anything. If the long-headed Scotchman finds out that the Froissart Brabants are no connection of ours, then it is all up with us; that's all."

"You have told Eleanor something of the sort?"

"Yes, I showed her an imaginary Chateau Brabant

that day we passed Froissart, and affected the grief I did not feel. She was quite moved ; she has her soft bit like all women. She already contemplates herself as the Patron Saint of the Brabants, retrieving the fallen fortunes of a great and noble house."

Madame Brabant laughed.

"Do you not care for her, Louis? She is a very handsome girl."

"No, I do not. I prefer a little woman of a gentler nature. She is too fierce and passionate. She wearies me."

"But you will be kind to her?"

"Oh, yes. Do you think I could be unkind, mother?"

"You are very selfish, Louis. I could imagine any one who crossed you having but a poor time of it. I have never crossed you, and sometimes I think I have made a mistake. Adrian, whom I have neglected, repays me with more kindness and consideration."

"Adrian is naturally soft, poor fellow," said Brabant, with a curious mingling of contempt and pity in his voice. "Where did you say he had taken Eleanor this morning?"

"To the Goupil Gallery, and they lunch at the Criterion. We go north, I suppose, the day after to-morrow."

Louis threw up his arms, and gave a huge yawn.

"It is a tremendous sacrifice to bury oneself even for a day or two in such a savage spot. Even to risk this abominable climate at this season of the year deserves no ordinary recompense. What do you propose to do with Adrian while we are out of London?"

"Oh, I have planned it well. My old friend, Clara Ffoliot, married the dramatist Rickman. They live at Richmond. They shall take Adrian, and he will be only too glad to have the chance of sitting at the feet of the great Rickman, though he is a prince of humbugs. I am going out there this afternoon."

"You are very clever, mother. You think of every-

thing. You have schemed well for us. You deserve some return."

"I expect it—a little flat in Paris after you are married, and a modest income. I shall ask no more. Adrian can come to me then if he likes, and write for the fame he dreams of. I am miserable away from my Paris. I live in the hope of spending my days there."

"Well, we shall see," said Louis, indolently. "The next item on the programme is to ask Eleanor. Would you advise me to do it before we leave London?"

"Most certainly. Secure her promise before you subject her to the influences of her own people. It is the mother I dread. I gather from Eleanor she is one of the pious sort—the most difficult of all to deal with."

"To-morrow, then, I shall do my duty. In view of it I must to-day have a little relaxation."

"Then you will not accompany me to Richmond?"

"No, thank you. *Au revoir.*"

He sauntered out of the house, and Madame Brabant remained some time in deep meditation. As she sat there scheming for the future, her face became as the face of an old woman. It was a face not without power and a certain attractiveness, but the finer attributes of the woman's character had been almost destroyed by a career of scheming and double-dealing, the object of which was to secure a good position and livelihood out of no visible means. Early left widowed by her elderly French husband, Charlotte Brabant had had a hard struggle to rear and educate her two sons. She had chosen Paris as her home, because her sister, Madame Fourmin, had there a ladies' school, and also because she was thus brought nearer to her husband's relatives, the Brabants, a large connection, many of them in excellent positions. But they, disliking the English wife, had done but little for her, and her struggle had been hard.

Moreover, she had made a tremendous mistake in her rearing of the boys, especially the elder, whom she had brought up, as she fondly imagined, a gentleman. Whatever attributes he may have possessed, he had a

very real and honest contempt for work, and trusted to his looks and his wits to get him the livelihood he was too indolent to earn. Adrian was slightly deformed, and in his poor misshapen body carried a soul as beautiful as his brother's was sordid and mean. He had a great gift, to which he was only yet struggling to give utterance. He dreamed his passionate dreams, and let many opportunities slip, yet all the while the gift was slowly maturing, and would ultimately find adequate voice. His mother, though not totally indifferent to her second son, plainly showed her preference for the elder. She had somewhat recovered from the shock of Adrian's deformity, but he was a disappointment to her. In an atmosphere so uncongenial—since between the brothers any communion of thought or aim was impossible—it can be understood that Adrian Brabant was not conspicuously happy. Nay, he was a solitary and lonely man; the hunger of his heart for sympathy, for companionship, was in his eyes.

To Eleanor Kerr, whom he had invested with many ideal qualities, he spoke more freely than to any other human being. She was very young, and though matured in many ways, she had all a school-girl's romantic enthusiasm for such ideals as Adrian Brabant presented to her. She did not half-understand him when he talked impassionedly about art, and occasionally he bored her. But she always listened very patiently, and conveyed to him the impression of her absolute belief in him. To a person of Adrian Brabant's temperament this could only result in one thing, his passionate love for her. But as many a woman has done since the world's history began, Eleanor wilfully passed by the gold for the dross, and lavished her undisciplined affection upon Louis, who was incapable of a disinterested affection. She thought of him all that grey morning as she walked by Adrian's side through the gallery listening to his talk of art, and of work for art's sake only. And while she listened with apparent quiet interest, she was counting the minutes when she would return to her hotel and see Louis.

As they walked along Piccadilly many people regarded with interest the handsome queenly girl with bronze gold hair and skin like lilies and roses, and the delicate-looking man with the spirituelle face and distinguished air who walked so closely by her side.

"Do you think your brother will join us at lunch?" she asked, as they paused a moment at the busy crossing at Piccadilly Circus. "He half-promised, did he not?"

"Yes, but we need not depend upon him. Louis says many things which he straightway forgets. You are not in a hurry to go back to the hotel, are you? My mother, I know, will spend the afternoon at Richmond."

"No, I am not in a hurry," Eleanor replied, but listlessly. "Where are we going? Oh, is this the Criterion?"

"Yes. I suppose you know it is decided I do not go north with you?"

"No, is it?" she said, with a start. "But I do not understand why. I should like to show you Scotland, and in my mother I trust you would find a congenial companion."

"My mother fears the journey, though I assure her I am very strong," he said, and there was a trace of sad impatience in his voice. "And it is almost settled that I go, meanwhile, to the Rickmans. It is an opportunity I should not miss."

"I suppose not," she said carelessly. "No doubt you will be happier there. We have nothing of that sort to offer you; only fresh air, and shooting and good ice."

"From the last two I am shut off," he said, quietly.

She turned her head and looked at him sympathetically, and his pulses beat. Her face so softened was wonderfully beautiful; it had power to move even the casual passer-by.

"Forgive me. I spoke thoughtlessly," she said, softly, and even as she spoke the warm colour rose rich and red in her cheeks, for she pictured to herself the frozen loch at Kinghorn with its dark belt of trees isolating it from the outer world, and on its smooth surface gliding two

lonely figures, she and another, not the man by her side.

"Are you sure you want lunch, Adrian?" she asked, quite suddenly. "It seems early, and I am not at all hungry."

"It is two o'clock," he replied, gravely. "And my mother will say I have taken but poor care of you if I give you no lunch."

She smiled a little absently, and they entered the restaurant together. Their talk flagged as they sat at the table, and they did not linger over their meal, dainty and appetising though it was.

"Let us go for a spin in a hansom round the park," she said then. "You have paid for the pictures and the lunch. Let me pay for the hansom and tea in Bond Street. Do, it is only fair—and I shall not come out with you any more, Adrian, if you do not allow me to pay my share. You know we agreed to be chums, and chums should be equal in everything."

"Just as you like," he replied, with that rare smile of his, which had more of pathos than of pleasure in it always.

She noticed him more than usually grave as they drove through Piccadilly once more, and at last she asked the cause.

Her liking for Adrian Brabant was strong and sincere; she felt at home with him, safe and happy in his presence; though he had no power to move her like his brother.

"I heard them say you go the day after to-morrow. I shall miss you very much. May I say something to you quite frankly, Eleanor?"

"Surely you may," she replied, looking at him wonderingly. She noted, as she had done many times before, the delicate, refined outline of his face, the strength as well as sweetness about the mouth, and her inward thought was that but for his infirmity he had been a finer looking man by far than Louis.

"What is it, Adrian? I was smiling just before you

spoke at the idea of meeting my mother just now. This is far from proper or conventional: yet it is very pleasant."

"She would know you were quite safe with me," she replied, gravely still, not even smiling at her light speech.

"I want to ask you something, Eleanor. It is this—If Louis asks you to marry him, will you say yes?" And now the red dyed her cheek, and though she turned her head away swiftly he caught her expression and understood.

"I am answered," he said, and shaded his eyes with his hands a moment. When he spoke again the buoyance had gone out of his voice.

"It has always been so," he began, more to himself than to her. "Louis first—always—and I do not grudge him his good fortune, for he is a fine fellow in many respects. I think you will be able to give to his character the finer touch it needs."

She never spoke, and kept her head averted, and there was a still waiting look on her face, which told that she drank in every word.

"You have told me a great deal about your home," he went on. "Do you think your parents will consent to your entering a family of which they know nothing? I should think they would be very difficult to satisfy."

"My mother will. My father is more interested in his cattle and his horses than in his children."

"But he must be proud of you."

"No, I don't think he is. I wish you would come to Haugh too, Adrian."

"I may come some day—after you are my sister, but not now."

"Why not now?"

"I may tell you some day. I have never had a sister. You will be my sister if you marry Louis."

"Whether I marry him or not," she said, with the sudden sincerity to which he always moved her, "it will make no difference to you. I shall never forget

your kindness to me. You know so much, and you have made my trip on the Continent delightful. I shall never forget it."

"Nor I," he said, soberly. "But we will talk of something else."





CHAPTER IV.

"I SHOULD NOT THINK OF SUCH A THING."

LATE that night, when Louis Brabant was smoking a last pipe over the dying embers of the fire in their private sitting-room, Adrian came from the bedroom adjoining, wearing his dressing-gown.

"Hulloa! I thought you'd be asleep ages ago," he said lightly. "I've just come in from the Empire, and a beastly poor performance it was. Have a cigar?"

"Not just now. Put on a bit of coal, I want to talk to you."

Louis did as he was bid, but not cheerfully. He did not relish Adrian's talks, which were too straight and plain to suit him. The brothers, though not comrades, had never had a serious quarrel, Louis always avoiding close quarters with the more serious-minded Adrian, who, in the midst of artificial and uncongenial surroundings, had grown up strangely genuine and upright.

We do sometimes see such independence of environment, occasionally encounter a gem of pure character in quarters the most uncongenial and most unlikely. Yet are we not expressly told that men do not gather figs off thistles or grapes from thorns?

"I want to talk to you, Louis, about Eleanor Kerr."

"What about her?" inquired Louis, carelessly, yet

with a certain uneasiness of manner which belied his indifference.

"You are contemplating marrying her—are you not?"

"I suppose so. What of that?"

"What is the motive? You do not care for her. Anybody can see it."

"I don't wear my heart on my sleeve, perhaps," said Louis, significantly. "What other motive could I have?"

"It is futile to ask such questions. I know, though I have not been told, that this marriage has been planned by my mother and you solely for the sake of the fortune she is supposed to possess. Do you for a moment think that her parents will hand over her and her portion, be it great or small, to a needy adventurer who can give no satisfactory account of himself?"

"You don't choose your words very well, Adrian—a needy adventurer. By Jove, it sounds rather strong."

"It is true. Our way of life sickens me, as it would sicken any honest man. It passes my comprehension how you, so strong in body and mind, can stand it."

He had often hinted this, but now spoke with a passionate fervour, which Louis felt to be the outcome of a strong conviction. He puffed at his cigar in silence, speaking no word.

"The case plainly stated is this. Our mother's income does not exceed two thousand francs. We live at the rate of ten thousand; where does it come from?"

"You forgot she had a thousand francs from Uncle Theodore last week."

"Yes, got from him by false pretences. Saying she was ill and in poverty. And we are in such debt we dare not show our faces in the Avenue D'Ena. I would to God I were as other men—even as you are. I would change affairs at once."

"Your own conscience may be easy since you do earn something by your pictures, and you hope to earn more by your books, when the world shall have recognised in

you its new genius. Our mother has gone to Richmond this afternoon, presumably to interest Rickman in you."

Adrian shrugged his shoulders.

"But that is not the point. What I want to say is that if you are going to inveigle Eleanor Kerr into this disastrous marriage for your own ends, simply to get her fortune, I will not be a party to it."

"What can you do?"

"I can warn her, or her people. But I do not believe it will be necessary. Unless they are idiots they will want some credentials from the man who seeks to marry their daughter. You know as well as I that you have none to give."

"Gently, my dear Adrian—gently, or I shall begin to suspect in you some interested motive," said Louis, quietly, yet with a certain significance.

"Yes, I have an interested motive. I would not see the young girl sacrificed, as she will be in a loveless marriage. If you were passionately attached to her, I confess I should be more lenient in my judgment, because an honest love might work some saving grace in you."

Louis finished his cigar, and with a yawn threw the end in the fire.

"You have no sense of family honour, Adrian," he said, drily. "If you have quite finished your harangue I shall go to bed—"

"Then you intend to go on—to marry Eleanor, if she will take you?"

"Most decidedly."

"Good-night," said Adrian, abruptly, and with knit brows and compressed lips went back to his room.

Louis, after some slight hesitation, left the sitting-room, and going along the corridor knocked lightly at the door of the chamber occupied by his mother. She immediately opened it, looked surprised, and motioned him to enter.

"Why, what is it? I thought you had gone to bed."

"I am just going. Can I come in for a moment? I

have something to say, and in the sitting-room Adrian might overhear it, and that I wish to avoid."

"Come in."

Madame Brabant closed the door after him, and turned the key.

"Adrian has just been rating me about Miss Kerr. He says we are trying to get her money, which, though unpleasant to hear, is true. He also threatens most unpleasantly to spoil our little game."

"How can he do so if he is in Richmond and we in Scotland?"

"He knows the use of a pen, I suppose," said Louis gloomily. "He says he will tell her people the true state of the case. What is to be done?"

Madame Brabant looked much annoyed.

"Adrian is very aggravating. Not content with being a burden on me, he would seek to thwart our efforts to advance the family interests. I must talk plainly to him to-morrow; and I see now it will be imperative for you to speak to Eleanor without delay."

"Then, you think I should ask her to-morrow?"

"I do."

"I will. If we have her consent first it will make things easier down there. I wish it had been possible to secure her beyond recall."

"To marry her here, do you mean?" asked Madame Brabant, with the air of one struck by a new idea.

Louis nodded, and she ruminated for a moment.

"It is a bright thought. If you thought there was any chance of such a happy and sure way out of the difficulty I could feign illness, or devise some other means of delaying her departure for Scotland."

"I will ask her to-morrow, and according as she treats me I will act. But we must not be too precipitate with her."

"She adores you, Louis," replied his mother complacently. "I am sure there will be no difficulty. You are a great comfort to me, my son."

Louis laughed rather mirthlessly.

"I am making a sacrifice of myself for the family. I admire Eleanor Kerr as a fine woman, but I am not in love with her. It will be rather a bore to have a wife so devotedly attached to me."

"Who knows, you may fall in love with her afterwards? Stranger things have happened," said Madame with a smile, and the two parted.

Next day a little excursion was planned to the country. Adrian was engaged to spend the day with the Rickmans, at Richmond, and at the last moment Madame Brabant pleaded a bad headache and remained at home.

Eleanor found herself deliriously happy in the company of Louis Brabant for four or five hours. The fascination he exercised over her was one which a man of the world might very naturally exercise over a young and inexperienced girl. His manners were elegant and winning, and when he took pains to make himself agreeable, was a most delightful companion.

Suggesting rather than dwelling upon the sadness which had fallen upon the house of Brabant, he enlisted her interest and her sympathy. She regarded him as we might regard some hero of romance, investing him with a thousand fine attributes he did not possess.

"We have had a most happy day, have we not?" he said, as they drove back in the gathering dusk of the afternoon. "It will live in my memory—all the more vividly that it will soon be all over."

"Why should it all be at an end?" she asked timidly.

"After our visit to Scotland we may say good-bye. It seems to me the height of folly to go there and receive the death-knell to my hopes."

Eleanor sat very still, but in the darkness her face glowed, and her heart was beating wildly. He waited a moment, and then continued in a low, impassioned tone.

"You must have seen my daily growing love for you, Eleanor. I know it is madness for me to speak; but I should love to hear from your lips the assurance that in

happier circumstances I might have dared to ask what I am now forbidden."

"Why forbidden?" she asked, almost under her breath; but he caught the whispered words.

"Dearest, do not torture me. You know I am a poor man; that my family have fallen on evil days. I dare not even whisper what a more fortunate man might boldly ask."

"Money is not everything," she said, in a low voice, and suffered him to clasp her hand.

"No; but unfortunately in these days it is in the ascendant. Do you think for a moment that your father would consent to give you to a man who has nothing but burdened estates and an ancient but noble name?"

Eleanor pictured her father listening to this sort of high-sounding language, and could have laughed outright.

"If it were to make me happy—"

"Would it make you happy?" he interrupted, bending over her.

She bowed her head and moved nearer to him; nor was he slow to understand that mute gesture.

"I am at once the happiest and most miserable of men," he said, after a time. "Happy, because I have won you—miserable, because I may have won only to lose."

"I will never give you up, Louis," she said quietly, yet with decision.

"Then you will help me when I have that terrible ordeal to go through at your home: the searching examination of affairs; the questioning into family misfortunes, which will sting me to the quick? You will stand by me through all that?"

"I will never give you up," she repeated.

"I dread it. It is the misfortune of the Brabants to be ultra sensitive. All noble minds who have suffered such serious reverses, who have lived to see the prestige of their name lowered in the dust, suffer these agonies, but I never felt it more acutely than now, when I see in

these untoward circumstances a bar to my happiness."

"It will not be a bar. My father is not a hard man. He spends money lavishly. I am sure he will think the other things you have to offer equivalent to money."

"I dread it. I have always heard that your countrymen set great store by money—I wish you were a penniless orphan, in order that I might prove to you the disinterestedness of my love."

"I do not doubt it."

"Do you not?"

"How could I?" she asked, and her trusting eyes looked up into his.

"And you do care a little for me?"

"Oh, I do."

He leaned back in the carriage and appeared lost in thought; his face wore a preoccupied, gloomy look.

"I could almost wish," he said at length—"I could almost wish that I had never met you."

"Do not say that," she answered quickly. "Why do you wish it?"

"Because my mind is full of forebodings. I feel almost sure I am destined to lose you. It would be in keeping with the rest of the ill-fortune which has so long pursued the unlucky house of Brabant."

"You cannot lose me," she whispered shyly, "if I refuse to be lost."

He smiled, and with a very real assumption of fondness, drew her to his side.

"You put it exquisitely, dear one. Would you, then, make such a sacrifice, brave even your father's displeasure, for my sake?"

"Willingly. Have I not said I will never give you up?"

"And if, after I have laid my life before your father, he should refuse to listen, would you still be true to me?"

"Till death."

"My own one, I trust no such sacrifice will be neces-

sary. I have always held that it is too much for any man to ask that a woman should sever herself for ever from her own people for his sake. Ties of blood are too strong to be thus wantonly broken. Yet I confess I am full of misgiving. I cannot bear the thought of losing you. I could almost wish we lived in the old days when a willing bride and a fleet horse were sufficient for any Brabant."

She smiled. The romantic fancy pleased her. It was pleasant to be thus wooed, and for the moment she gave herself up to the fascination of it.

"Dearest, there is a thought in my mind; I almost fear to utter it; it is suggested by your smile. If it horrifies you, pray forget it, though it is only born of my great love for you."

"What is it?"

"It is still possible for us to put ourselves beyond the risk of any interference. We could marry before we leave London."

"Without my father's consent?" she asked, with such apparent calmness that he felt emboldened to go on.

"Yes, by delaying our departure another day it could be done. Will you, Eleanor?"

She drew herself back from him suddenly, and he felt the change in her very voice.

"I should not think of such a thing," she said, quite coldly. "Are we near the hotel? We seem to have been away so long."

Louis Brabant had made a mistake which it would take him a long time to undo.





CHAPTER V.

"YE HAVENA YOUR SORROWS TO SEEK."

THE poultry yard at Castlebar was Mrs. Allardyce's hobby, and the envy of the whole countryside. It was no use trying to compete with her at the local shows; she carried off every prize, and Castlebar eggs were sought after by henwives from all parts of Scotland. It was a sight to see her of a morning superintending the feeding of the fowls; and again in the afternoon, with her big basket, which was made specially with different compartments, in order that there might be no mixing. No hens were allowed to lay away at Castlebar; it was an unpardonable sin, which was promptly punished by the wringing of the culprit's neck. About four o'clock on a bleak December afternoon, a day or two before Christmas, Mrs. Allardyce was gathering her eggs. She made a curious figure, with her skirts gathered tightly round her, and big goloshes over her house-boots, black woollen mittens on her hands, and a black knitted shawl round her head and shoulders. She had just finished her task satisfactorily to herself, considering the season of the year, when the housemaid appeared.

"Mrs. Kerr, ma'am, in the dining-room."

"Aweel, tak' in the basket, wumman; or, no, I'll tak' it mysel', and show Mrs. Kerr what Castlebar hens can

dae in December. Bring in the tea, Janet, and that quickly. But tak' this basket or I get doon my frock."

She followed the girl in at the kitchen door, took down her skirts, pushed off her overshoes, and so, with her basket over her arm, strode into the dining-room, and planted it triumphantly on the table.

"How are ye, my wumman?" she said, heartily, and towered above the slender, fragile little mistress of Haugh, with a kindly, almost compassionate air. The contrast was certainly very great. The handsome furs worn by Mrs. Kerr, while becoming to her, seemed to make her look yet more girlish and more fragile; her face had no colour, and her eyes a weary look, which her friend knew and understood. Margaret Allardyce looked the picture of health, strength, ease of mind, the embodiment of strong and gracious motherliness. Alison Kerr was conscious of a vague envy as she looked.

"Ye look but jimpy. Are you weel?"

"I am quite well; but I have walked up, and the roads are heavy."

"Walked! Are there nae beasts in the Haugh stables?"

"Oh, yes, but Alec has the groom at Cupar. I don't mind the walk. The air is so fresh and pleasant, and I wanted to see you."

"Weel, tak' off your things and stop a bit. Bob will drive you back."

"I can't stay long. Eleanor is coming to-night."

"Oh, is she? What time?"

"About eight; if the London train is not too late to catch ours. If it is, they'll telegraph, and we'll go on to Kirkcaldy to meet the fast."

"Wha's they?"

"Her friends, the Brabants, who are coming with her."

"Is that the French folk?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Allardyce stopped the counting of her eggs, and looked round rather sharply.

"Ye dinna look as if ye were very blithe over their coming."

"Well, I'm not. I wish Eleanor had come alone."

"It would have been better. Chance folk, especially French, are not to be lipped to. I wonder Mr. Kerr let them come."

"So do I—but I think he's rather curious about them."

"I see. How is he the day?"

"Better. I hope he'll keep straight while these strangers are here."

"He's taken the attacks oftener, is he no?"

"Much oftener. It is not a month since the last one."

"Ah, well, your sorrows are no to seek, Alison Kerr, and I'm wae for you. Here's Janet wi' the tea. Tak' aff your cloak, then. There's comfort for every woman body in a cup o' guid tea."

She filled the cups and drew in her own chair to the fire. The light was waning, already the grey shadows of the swift twilight were descending. The fire made a ruddy glow in the pleasant family room, which, though much less grand than the Haugh, had more of comfort and homeliness. Mrs. Allardyce was a woman who created an atmosphere of home wherever she went.

"I feel very uneasy in my mind," said the mistress of Haugh, sipping her tea rather wearily. "Are you ever visited by forebodings of trouble?"

"No, but I've never had to try me such things as you hae. I've but one son, an' he's the best that walks, as his father was before him," said Margaret Allardyce, with an almost reverent air. "Lord, mak' me thankfu' for my mercies."

"Robert is very good, though we will hardly say he comes up to his father," said Mrs. Kerr. "I wonder why it is that I should have so much trouble, such frightful anxiety, about my children?"

She spoke with a certain querulousness, for which Mrs. Allardyce pitied her, because she so well under-

stood it. Not knowing what to say, she said nothing at all.

"Mrs Allardyce, do you believe in the law of heredity? I mean, do you think children are copies of their parents?" she asked, presently.

"I havena studied the question, but I canna but think our bairns must tak' after us mair or less," replied Mrs. Allardyce, with characteristic caution. "It stands to reason an' natur' that they should."

"Do you—do you think my Claud will turn out like his father? I sometimes wish he had died that time when he was so ill of scarlet fever," she said, quickly, and two great tears stood in her eyes.

"He's not like his father," said Mrs. Allardyce, soothingly, and her own eyes were not dry. "He has your gentle temper, you must ken that."

"Oh, yes; it is not that, it is the other thing—the drink, that is bothering me. I am afraid of it. Mrs. Allardyce, it is the curse of Haugh."

"It has been for long, I ken, but I havena heard it laid to Claud's name. Hae ye ony cause for fear?"

"A good deal. At College he was sometimes the worse for it. Willie Heron told me; and these people he is with in Cheshire, the lady, Mrs. Stanhurst, has written to me. When he comes home, with his father's example before him, what can I expect but his ruin?"

"Umph!"

Margaret Allardyce held her chin in her hand, and steadily regarded the fire. She was more deeply grieved than it was possible for her to express in words. "Were I you, Mrs. Kerr, I would banish the stuff from house an' ha'. I wouldna' see whisky on my table, no, nor allow it ower my door."

Mrs. Kerr gave a little wintry smile.

"You forget that there is a master at Haugh. When he agrees to that the millennium will have come."

"When does Claud come home?"

"This week; perhaps to-morrow or Saturday."

"For guid?"

"Yes. Alec says he must stay at home now and manage Haugh."

"An' gie' him mair time to drink, that's about it" said Mrs. Allardyce, grimly. "I'm sure I dinna ken what to say. If it be as you say, Haugh is not the place for Claud; and yet what to do?"

"I don't know. Do you wonder I am miserable; that I cannot be merry, as Alec would like me to be? If I go out of the house I do not know how I shall find things when I go back, and I shall feel it worse when the children are home. I don't expect Eleanor and her father will get on. They are too much alike; the passionate temper of the Kerrs is in them both."

"Toots, woman, now ye are makin' troubles for yoursel'. A lass bairn is aye sib to her father. I sympathise wi' you so far, but ye maunna mak' a mountain o' a molehill. It's just possible that the bairns may mak' a little difference in Haugh, an' that for their sakes Mr. Kerr will pu' himsel' thegither."

"Drink changes a man's very nature. He is not the Alec Kerr I knew long ago."

"But he was aye wild, was he no? I've heard o' him afore I ever saw him."

"None of the Kerrs have a very good name," said Mrs. Kerr, "and I made a mistake many another woman has made—married a man to reform him. It cannot be done."

"Never, do you think?"

"Well, I have never known of a case."

"It is rather a hopeless creed, but I'm wantin' to hear mair aboot Eleanor an' the folk she's bringin'. Is she very thick wi' them?"

"Very. I'm just wondering if it isn't a love affair, after all, with the elder son."

"Do ye ken onything about them ava?"

"Not much. Madame Brabant is sister to the lady at whose school Eleanor has been. She was recommended to me by Mrs. Patrick Alexander—her own girls were there. She told me they were gentle folks,

of a good old French family reduced in circumstances."

"Aweel, a look is worth a' the hearsay in the world ; so ye'll no be lang in doubt. Would sic an alliance please Mr. Kerr, do you think ?"

"No ; there are two men he would give Eleanor to—your son and Willie Heron."

"Willie Heron!" repeated Mrs. Allardyce, in strong surprise. "He hasna a penny to bless himsel' wi'."

"Oh, but he has brains, Alec says, and he is a very lovable lad."

"Which would you favour ?"

A very sweet smile dawned like a gleam of sunshine on Mrs. Kerr's grave face.

"You needn't ask. I told Robert not long ago that to see Eleanor his wife would relieve my mind of its gravest fear. You would make no objection, I trust ?" she said, leaning forward suddenly, conscious of a certain stillness and reserve in her usually outspoken friend.

"A mother's objections are easy to override in such a case," Mrs. Allardyce replied with an effort. "Besides, what objection could I hae ?"

"You like Eleanor?" said Mrs. Kerr, almost pleadingly.

"I do—but I question if she likes me. I'm ower plain spoken for her."

"Has Robert said anything to you ?"

"Yes, he spoke ae nicht aboot three weeks ago—the same day, I think, ye had spoken of it at Haugh."

"You would be happy to see such a bond between Castlebar and Haugh, would you not ?" said Mrs. Kerr, with a curious persistence.

"If they are happy, I sho'ld be. I hae ae son, Alison, an' it's my daily discipline to try and keep frae makin' an idol o' him. He's a good lad ; few like him, though I say it, and the woman, be she gentle or simple, that marries wi' him will bless the day he socht her."

"I know that ; therefore I pray that when Robert speaks Eleanor will not say him nay."

The natural emotion stirred by such a talk was crushed by the ringing of the front door bell, and the admission of a visitor, a young, fair, sweet-looking girl, on whom Mrs. Allardyce bestowed most hearty greeting.

"Mary Heron, from the old manse, come in. It's only Mrs. Kerr—Janet, light the lamps as fast as ye can."

Mary Heron was a slender, girlish-looking creature, but there was a great deal of character in her face. Her mouth, though sweet, had a very decided curve, and her whole appearance and manner suggested individuality, activity of mind, and alertness of perception.

"How do you do, Mrs. Kerr? I hear Eleanor is coming home. Is it true she is coming to-day?"

"Quite true, my dear. How is your mother?"

"Mamma is very poorly, indeed. She eats nothing. I came over, Mrs. Allardyce, to see if Castlebar hens were laying any eggs. Mamma thinks she could eat an egg from Castlebar. I believe she only said so because she knew it would be impossible to get it."

She laid down her hat, and ran her fingers through her curly hair in a half-perplexed manner.

"I am really fearfully anxious about her, and so is Willie. He wants to send for a Professor from Edinburgh, but he has first to earn the wherewithall to pay him. He has gone over to-day to try and sell that lovely sketch of Seafeld, and I know, I feel it in my heart, that he is selling it for nothing to somebody who doesn't know the value of such exquisite work."

"Why didn't you let us see it, Mary?" said Mrs. Kerr, reproachfully.

"Oh, you have been very good. We can't sponge off our friends, because we cannot afford to lose them. There will be a turn in the tide one day; it is bound to come, if only poor mamma lives to see it. Why are you so dull, Mrs. Allardyce? Have the hens, like John Grumlie's, 'a laid away'?"

There was something most winning and attractive in the quickness with which the girl dashed from grave to

gay ; it indicated that peculiar versatility which we find in the artistic temperament everywhere.

"And Eleanor is really coming home? How pleasant it will be to see her again. Aren't you glad, Mrs. Kerr?"

"Very. I shall have Claud, too, next week, so we shall be very lively at Haugh. Willie and you must come up."

"So we will, if poor mamma mends. Are you just going?"

Mrs. Kerr rose and drew up her cloak.

"Why, will you not wait for Rob? He will be here in half an hour," asked Mrs. Allardyce.

"No, I won't wait. I have to see to things, having to dine so many. Will you and Robert dine with us on Saturday night, quietly? I should like you to see the people."

"We'll see."

Mrs. Allardyce followed her visitor to the outer door, and there talked with her a few minutes. When she returned to the dining-room the lamp was lit, and Mary Heron turned to her rather expectantly.

"You are worried about something, Mrs. Allardyce. Mrs. Kerr has been worrying you. I thought she had, when I came in."

"Wheesht, lassie. She has her faults ; but she is a good woman, an' her sorrows are heavy upon her. It's not that that's worryin' me, nor is it a thing I can speak aboot to onybody ; you, least o' a'."





CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT IS BETTER, HE IS GOOD."

IN the grounds of Haugh on a Sabbath morning walked Mr. Kerr and the French lady, Madame Brabant. Breakfast was just over, and it was Mr. Kerr's custom to smoke a pipe out of doors before setting out for church. The morning was dry and fine, a bright sun shining, and a brisk east wind wafting westward the sound of many a church bell. Madame, from the drawing-room window, had espied him crossing the lawn, and deeming it a fitting opportunity for a private talk, had made haste to join him. Alexander Kerr beheld her coming with dismay. He had nothing to say to her, he had not taken kindly to either mother or son, and had urged upon his wife the necessity of getting rid of them at the earliest possible moment.

"You like a constitutional, I see," she began with a charming smile. "May I join you? Is not the morning enchanting?"

Madame, used to softer climes, was really shivering; the lace wrap about her head and shoulders offering but poor protection against the cutting east wind.

"It's a fine fresh morning, ma'am—but the grass is very wet. You are not shod for it."

Madame glanced down at her neat foot encased in its dainty, but frail, Parisian shoe.

"They are stronger than they look, Mr. Kerr. May I walk round with you? I have not yet been through your lovely grounds. Ah, what a view, and how privileged you are to live in this sweet nook, remote from the strife and bustle of the world."

"It's fine in summer," replied Kerr, bluntly. "If you will walk, we'd better keep to the avenue, it's drier footing; but it's near kirk time. Are you going to the kirk? The mistress drives."

"Of course I will go, if I may. Well, Mr. Kerr, I have often heard of Scotland, but its beauty far surpasses my anticipation."

"Kinghorn isn't 'ettled to be a very beautiful place, ma'am," he replied, bluntly, "though we like it because we've been in it all our days."

"Ah, it has a wideness, a freedom, a natural beauty, and your lives are fitting to it. Now I understand much in Eleanor's character which has puzzled me. Such strong individuality, such charming manners; quite apart from the ordinary conventional demeanour. I no longer wonder at it. He would be a bold man who would seek to take her away from it."

"She will not go far away from it, ma'am, if I can help it. It was a mistake sending her to France. I told her mother so, but women will have their way."

"Poor France, to have earned your blame! Do you think Eleanor has not improved by her sojourn in our midst?"

"She's got some more airs, that's all I can see," he replied, candidly. "That's the bells, I believe, ma'am; we'd better turn back."

"It's only a quarter past ten," she replied, shrewdly. "Mrs. Kerr said we need not leave till twenty minutes to eleven; but I think the young people will walk."

"What young folk? Eleanor will go in the carriage with her mother," he answered, shortly.

"Ah, cruel, my son was looking forward to that walk. You will not deprive them."

"Eleanor will go in the carriage with her mother," he replied, calmly. "Are you coming in, Madame? I have my boots to put on—and I am sure you will need to change yours."

She bit her lip, and turned with him. He was very ungracious, so unpromisingly discourteous, that she did not know what to say next, yet upon him everything depended.

"Shall we see that strong-minded old lady with the unpronounceable name at church?"

"Do you mean Mrs. Allardyce?"

"Yes."

"No, she goes to the Free; we go to the Auld Kirk."

"What is the difference? I do not understand," inquired Madame, in a bewildered voice.

"The Auld was before the Disruption, the Free came after," replied Kerr, rather enjoying the bewilderment he was increasing.

"Is one church and one chapel? You mean that?"

"Maybe. There's your son looking out by the door. What does he do for his living?"

"He has no profession, except that of a soldier when his country needs him."

"And how does he put in his time?"

"Ah! well, there are family affairs to be attended to constantly."

"Is there any land? Mrs. Kerr said something about estates. Have you a family property?"

Now this was the opportunity for which Madame had longed, and she did not let it slip.

"Ah, yes, at Froissart, the home of the Brabants; but evil times have fallen on us. We cannot afford to live at the chateau."

"What for? Have you agricultural depression there as well as here?" asked Mr. Kerr, more interested than he had yet been in anything pertaining to his guests, who bored him ineffably.

"Yes, and the vintage has been bad four years in succession."

"Oh, it's a wine country, of course. Do you plant vines just as we do potatoes and sow corn?"

"Yes; but we have had blights and all sorts of things, and then the war devastated us."

"Oh, of course. I took sides with the Germans; it was a perfect treat to read about their splendid generalship. Your side made a poor show. It was nothing less than wholesale butchery of honest men. A cat could have generalled them as well."

"I am not French, so I can bear to hear that," said Madame, good humouredly. "We will thresh it out again if you like. You must get my son started on the subject. He will prove a clever opponent."

"Was he in the war?"

"No; unfortunately we were in England most of the time on account of my second son's health."

"Oh, yes, you have another son, my wife said. Does he do anything for his living?"

"He is a writer of books. Those high up in the literary world call him a genius."

"Umph!"

Madame perceived that she had not made the impression she desired, and was casting about for some more profitable type of conversation when she saw Mrs. Kerr beckoning to her from the window, and, with a graceful bow, she left Mr. Kerr and retired indoors. She took her son by the arm and drew him within the door. No one was in the hall, so she had opportunity for a hasty word with him.

"He is a tough old fibre," she said, jerking her thumb towards the door. "I fear we—we have no chance with him."

"I am going to risk it this very day. I'm sick of this; fough, it's enough to give one the cold shivers for a week."

At that moment Eleanor appeared on the stairs, radiant, the rich sealskin of her coat making an exquisite contrast to her bright face.

Alexander Kerr grudged his women folk nothing in the way of clothes for personal adornment. He paid the bills without a murmur, only requiring that they should look well.

"Oh, you are there, Madame. Mamma is looking for you; there is the carriage coming round from the stables."

"Am I not to have the privilege of walking with you?" asked Louis, with his deferential and impressive air.

Eleanor blushed.

"If you wish. I shall be pleased. You will come with papa and mamma, Madame. They always drive—"

"Perhaps I may remain at home," said Madame. "Only I should like the experience, and I want to understand your church observances; they seem a little complicated. Ah, here comes Monsieur."

Mr. Kerr entered, taking in the situation at a glance.

"The waggonette is round, Eleanor. It will hold us all, so you needn't be in such a hurry."

"Mayn't I walk, papa?" said Eleanor, hesitatingly.

"No, you mayn't," he replied curtly, and went upstairs.

Eleanor laid her muff disappointedly on the hall table.

"Such a lovely morning, too. Let us steal off, Mr. Brabant; they will overtake us half-way to the village."

Nothing loth, Louis took up his hat and went off. It was only when the others assembled at the carriage that Mr. Kerr discovered their absence. His wife knew by the expression of his face that he was too angry to speak. Eleanor took care that they were not overtaken on the way. She avoided the highway, and led her escort by wood and field down to the hoary old church standing on the little promontory jutting into the sea. They were seated in the pew when the others entered.

The congregation was sparse, for there were no strangers in the little town at that season of the year, and the ordinary churchgoers did not by any means fill the church.

The service was simple, but had a certain distinction

and impressiveness born of that very simplicity. Eleanor felt it alter her long absence from home, and was even moved by it in an unusual degree. What is familiar has a power to move us, especially if we are long estranged from it. The influence of association, especially in our earlier years, is stronger than we know. There were tears in Eleanor's eyes as she bent her head for the first prayer, and listened to the grave, pleasant tones of their own minister, the friend of the family, and of many another family in the parish, and for a moment she even forgot her new lover, who was kneeling, inexpressibly bored, by her side. When they came out he was wise in that he restrained himself from any comment on the service. To Eleanor it had seemed for the first time wholly beautiful and sweet. Her face wore a very softened and lovely look as they walked slowly up the steep ascent to the High Street, which presented a livelier appearance than usual, the other two churches having just dispersed also. Down the middle of the High Street came Robert Allardyce and his mother, talking with some other people. Mr. Kerr hastened to join them, and to pay them marked attention, as he had done at Haugh the previous evening. It was all on account of Robert, whose suit he favoured, and in order to mark the difference of his opinion regarding the Brabants. If there was one thing on earth Alexander Kerr mortally hated, it was the candid tongue of Margaret Allardyce, which spared none when she thought fit to speak. It was a curious little company gathered together in the wide part of the old High Street, waiting for the carriages to come from the stable. Many glanced at them, as was natural. Everybody was interested in Haugh, which, for events, was the most exciting house in the district; and Miss Kerr's home-coming was thought likely to make a bit of stir in the place. Before she went to Paris she had been constantly riding and driving about, and most of the folk were glad to see her back. Robert Allardyce, whose sharp eyes had the previous evening detected the state of affairs, looked rather dull. He merely shook hands

with Eleanor, and then stepped to her mother's side. It was an awkward five minutes till the carriages appeared; even Madame's gushing comments on the place failed to remove the sense of restraint.

"Ah, how lovely it is here!" she exclaimed. "I am entranced. Look at the expanse of sea; it is heavenly; is it not?"

She addressed herself to Mrs. Allardyce, but did not venture upon her name. That good lady ominously sniffed.

"I don't know about heavenly. It looks snell enough, if ye ask me, an' there's anither storm comin' up frae the East Neuk. It'll be here afore nicht."

"Everything is so fresh, so delightful, so simple," pursued Madame, gushingly, not having comprehended what had been said. "It is like a refreshing draught to breathe the air here. You ought to be very happy people."

"I dinna ken that Kinghorn is specially singled out for happiness, is it, Eleanor?" said Mrs. Allardyce in her driest mood, whereat Mr. Kerr gave a huge guffaw, and his wife nervously smiled.

Then there was a great handshaking, and the carriages drove off their separate ways. The drive back to Haugh was rather pleasanter than it had been in the morning—chiefly owing to Louis Brabant, who, perceiving that he and Eleanor had given offence, strove to appear as amiable as possible. By the time they reached Haugh gates he had so far thawed his host that he invited him to go round the stables and the cattle pens with him. Mrs. Kerr went into her daughter's room for a word before going to her own.

"Why did you vex your father as you did this morning, Eleanor?" she asked. "It was most unwise of you, if you wish him to be courteous to your friends."

"Papa is too easily made angry, is he not, mamma? What was there in my walking down with Mr. Brabant to vex him?"

"It was the very thing to vex him. You ought to know him by now. We must obey him, if we want to

live at peace here. We had enough of disputes before you went to school. I hoped you would have learned there to be patient and quiet."

"Well, but, mother, I don't see why two grown-up women should submit to be ordered about like children just because papa happens to have a bad temper," said Eleanor, rather sullenly.

"You ought not to speak like that of your father, Eleanor. Besides, I was angry too, this morning. How long are your friends going to stay?"

"Why, they have just come, mother!" cried Eleanor, in dismay.

"Your father asked me again to-day how long they were going to stay. We don't particularly like them, Eleanor."

"Why not? I am sure they are charming people; of course, they are a little different from the set we have here. I was quite affronted by Mrs. Allardyce this morning. Really, Robert ought to speak to her."

Mrs. Kerr's pale cheek faintly coloured. "It ill becomes you, Eleanor, to begin running down your old friends. When they come to be tried, they'll do more for you than any of the new."

"I'm not running them down; but, you know, Mrs. Allardyce is quite hopelessly vulgar and *outré*. She would not be tolerated anywhere but here. It is a wonder to see Robert as he is. Really, I thought him quite fine-looking this morning."

"He is fine-looking, and, what is better, he is good," said Mrs. Kerr warmly. "The woman who marries Robert Allardyce will be a happy one, Eleanor."

"I daresay she will," said Eleanor absently; and her mother, perceiving that her thoughts were not with the man of whom they were speaking, left the room with a little sigh.



CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW ON THE HEARTH.

THE Brabants had only been two days at Haugh, and already Mr. Kerr found their presence irksome. The crisis came that very Sabbath night, after the ladies had gone to bed. The two men were sitting in Mr. Kerr's own den, with a box of cigars and whisky and water before them, two elements which, as a rule, conduce to sociability. It was a chance Louis Brabant did not intend to lose. He was heartily sick of life in a country house ; and as his aim in seeking Eleanor was a purely mercenary one, her presence was not sufficient to reconcile him to so great a change. But the visit had satisfied him and his mother regarding the family, who were quite evidently people of position and substance in the county.

"I have been thinking very much all day about a remark you made to my mother this morning," he began, with that nice mixture of deference and humility he knew so well how to assume.

"Ay, what was that?" asked Kerr affably. He was at his second glass, and his humour was good. For the first time for six weeks the vet. had given him a clean bill of health for his cattle-sheds, and prosperity seemed restored to Haugh.

"It was about your daughter. You said, I think, that

you would not let her marry far from this neighbourhood?"

"I did say so," replied Haugh; "and, what's more, I meant it."

"But, pardon me, circumstances might arise which would necessitate some modification of that edict. It did not strike me that there would be many eligibles here."

"There are plenty men good enough for Eleanor here, if that is what you mean," replied Kerr, grimly.

"Of course she could command the whole neighbourhood, there could be no question of it; but, supposing she might be disposed towards someone a little further afield, other things being equal, you would not object, would you?"

Mr. Kerr finished his cigar in absolute silence. He was very shrewd—he knew as well what his guest was driving at as if he had spoken fairly out. But it was his humour to play a little with him, which he did with admirable skill.

"What do you mean by other things?"

"Well, supposing one, a stranger to this favoured locality, should sue for your daughter's hand, would you reject him on that plea alone?"

"It would depend—but, yes, I think I would."

"But would that not be a manifest injustice? Would you not permit to your daughter the right of choice you claimed for yourself in that same matter?"

"She's a woman, and she's rather inclined to be led away by silly nonsense. Her mother and me know better than her what would be good for her."

"Am I to infer that you have already chosen?" asked Brabant eagerly.

Kerr slowly nodded his head.

"But, pardon me; if she is not willing—if her affections are already engaged, would you be cruel?"

"If her affections are engaged, she can disengage them. She's only nineteen, and might have many a fancy yet.

I'm not saying anything against that, but as to marrying, that's a different matter, lad."

Brabant bit his cigar through in sheer irritation. This hard-headed, blunt-spoken Scotchman, whose will was as rigid and as fixed as a stone wall, altogether disconcerted him. He could not find a weak spot in him anywhere. The only thing to be done, apparently, was to drive straight ahead and take the consequences.

"I suppose, sir, you have some idea of what brought us—at least me—here?"

"I may or may not, but that has nothing to do with the case. I've made up my mind who is to have Eleanor to wife, and it is not you."

"But if I love her, and she loves me? I am poor, it is true, but I can offer some things money cannot buy—an old and honourable name."

"Ye cannot eat and drink that, my man, nor will it put boots on the bairns' feet," quoth Kerr roughly, and filled out another big dram.

"If your daughter's happiness is involved, sir, would you not reconsider your harsh decision?"

"You have spoken to her, I suppose, since you speak so glibly of her happiness?" said Kerr drily.

"Yes, I have. It was unpremeditated, but we cannot always control these matters. I know that I ought first to have spoken to you. I am here to make my peace with you."

"I bear ye no grudge, my man," said Kerr placidly. "If you and Eleanor like to talk silly nonsense, well then ye can; but as to marrying, as I said before, that's a different matter."

"But she has already promised to be my wife. We are devotedly attached to each other," pleaded Brabant, but his pleading made no impression on the stone wall of Alexander Kerr's unperturbed indifference.

"I can't help that, sir," he replied calmly.

"Then you absolutely refuse your consent?" said Brabant, and his colour rose.

"Absolutely."

"For what reason? You are not very courteous to me, Mr. Kerr. As a gentleman and an honest man I deserve better treatment."

"I am not wishing to be rude to you, sir," replied Kerr, still calmly. "Surely a man has the right to judge for himself in a matter like this? Did you think it likely that I, or any man, would give my daughter to a man I know nothing about?"

"Sir," said Brabant haughtily, "I can give credentials. Go to Froissart if you like, and find out whether we have lied about our family."

"I'm not needing to go to Froissart, or any other part," said Kerr, nettled by his tone. "I have but one lassie. I'm a rough tyke, they say, but I'm not without natural affection for my own, and if you or any other man thinks I'm going to give my lass to any needy adventurer, be he French or German, that likes to come this way, then ye've made a mistake, that's all."

Brabant rose, rather pale.

"You have insulted me, sir. Were the place less outlandish I should even now rouse my mother and refuse to sleep another night under your roof. As it is, of course, we will leave first thing in the morning."

"It will be as well," said Kerr drily.

"But understand that though I have been insulted and flouted, I by no means give your daughter up. As soon as she is of age I shall claim her."

"You can if you like. It'll maybe be news to you to hear that in that case, or indeed any other case, she hasna a penny to bless herself with. The place is her brother's, and any money that I have gathered myself only goes where I am pleased. It is well for you to understand that."

"You insult me still further, and tempt me to forget who you are," said Brabant loftily, though in his heart he was sick and sorry over the ruin of the castle he had built. "You may live to regret this, and may yet be proud to entertain the offer you scorn."

"When that happens I'll let ye ken," said Kerr drily.

"Good-night to you—the carriage will be ready at nine to-morrow morning to take you and Madame to the station."

Brabant flung himself out of the room, and Kerr took a big draught from his tumbler and filled another pipe. It was now past midnight, and Mrs. Kerr, lying wide awake in the room above, heard their voices, which they had unconsciously raised. She also heard Brabant come upstairs, and go past the dining-room door to the guest-room occupied by his mother. Knocking there, he went in and shut the door. She got up then, put on her dressing-gown, and ran down to the library.

"What has happened, Alec? Have you had words with Mr. Brabant?"

"I have; come in, Alison, and shut the door," he said, half-relieved to see her, for the thing worried him, and he felt vaguely certain that he had not heard the end of it.

Mrs. Kerr glided into the room, and sat down meekly, with an air of frightened expectancy. She wore a blue dressing-gown, which was admirably becoming to her, and seemed to make her look very fragile.

It struck Kerr, even in the midst of his other worries, that his wife looked far from strong. But he made no remark upon his observation.

"Had you any idea, Alison, what brought the folks here?" he asked bluntly.

"Not before they came; but, of course, I soon saw the drift of things and deplored it."

"So ye might. He's gotten Eleanor's word, and a hard job I had to convince him he would never get mine."

"And what are you going to do?"

Kerr took two meditative draws at his pipe.

"The carriage will be at the door the morn at nine to take them to the station," he replied.

"Oh, Alec, I am so thankful," she said, with unmistakable relief. "It was a great mistake letting them come."

"So it was, and you were against it; and how was I to know Eleanor would take up with foreign folk like that? Certy, if she marries that Frenchman, her sorrows arena far to seek."

"What did he say?" asked Mrs. Kerr anxiously.

"Oh, he said a lot about their fine estates at a place with an outlandish name; an' he said he wouldn't give her up, that when she was twenty-one he would marry her in spite of me."

"And what did you say to that?"

"The only thing I could say, that she hadna a bawbee to her name, except what I would give her, which would be nothing if she marries against my will."

"I somehow feel as if there would be trouble over this, Alec."

"What for should there be trouble? Now, who is to speak to Eleanor after these folk are away—you or me?"

"She doesn't much heed what I say, but perhaps I'd better speak to her first."

"There is one thing that must be seen to in the morning, and that is that she gets no word with Brabant by herself."

"There will not be much time if they are going at nine."

"Time enough. I'll tell you what—dinna let Katie waken Eleanor at all, and I'll see that the carriage is here sharp. Eleanor is a sleepy-head; she'll lie till noon, I've heard you say, if you'll let her."

"It is a good plan. I can tell Katie when she brings our hot water; she comes to us aye first."

"Now, look here, Alison, there's to be no coddling of Nell. This thing is nipped in the bud, and I mean that it is the end of it, and the sooner she turns her mind to Robert Allardyce the better."

He put out his hand as he spoke to refill his glass from the decanter. She intercepted him, laying her white fingers on his.

"You've had enough, Alec. Let me take it away, and come you to bed; it's after one."

He went on pouring out the spirit as if he had not heard her, and she rose, with a long sigh. Active resistance was now impossible to her; she could only look on and suffer silently.

"It's too late in the day, Alison," he said, with a kind of rough kindness. "Ye married me with your eyes wide open. The Kerrs are a' ill; few o' them have dee'd in their beds."

"Two at the dykeside, your father and your grandfather. It might have been a warning to you."

"It's in the blood," he said, and the words made her shiver—thinking of Claud, the bright boy, her first-born and only son—this dark assertion made her heart faint with fear.

"Don't say that, Alec. Think of Claud, and even of Eleanor. She might not escape. Let me take it away."

"Go to your bed, my woman, and let me finish my pipe," he said, and she silently obeyed.

She heard the Brabants talking as she passed Madame's door, and the sound gave her a queer, eerie feeling, as if she had enemies under her very roof-tree. She went in to Eleanor's room before her own, and turned up the peep of gas burning at the dressing-table. Eleanor was sound asleep, with one arm under her head and the other outside the coverlet—it was the sound sleep of youth and health, undisturbed apparently by a single morbid dream or haunting thought. The anxious mother, who, since her marriage-day, four and twenty years before, had scarcely been free from care, thanked God for that pleasant sleep, for the innocent dimpling roundness of her face, for the flush of pure health on the cheeks, for the firm, strong hands to which she for a moment laid her pale lips. Of her beauty, which was striking, she gave no thought beyond the natural pride of a mother who beholds her daughter fair. Her concern for the child lay deeper than that, and had to do with her moral and eternal welfare. When she crept back to her own bed, chilled and unrelieved, no sleep was possible to her.

She heard two strike on the hall clock; she rose again and stole from the room. All was quiet in the corridors, though she had not heard Louis Brabant go up to his own chamber. He had crept up to it softly with his slippers in his hand.

She found in the smoking-room what did not surprise her—what she had found many a time before. The fire had gone out, and the air was beginning to chill. In his easy-chair, fast asleep, lay her husband. His pipe had fallen from his mouth and burned a hole in his velvet jacket. The decanter was nearly empty. Scarcely looking at him, she gathered up the things and locked them in the cupboard. Then after making one futile attempt to rouse him, she got some kindling wood from a box in the cupboard and made up the fire. When she saw it had kindled up she laid on a lump of coal, and then put a fur rug from the couch over her husband's knees. These offices she had done for him innumerable times, and she did them methodically and without effort. Very likely the servants would so find him in the morning, when he would wake up, take his bath, and come down to breakfast a great deal fresher than his wife. As yet his iron constitution, upbuilt in childhood on oatmeal and milk, appeared to laugh at the ravages of such abuse. But a day of reckoning would come sooner or later, as it comes to all who thus trample on the laws of Nature and of God.

Thus poor Alison Kerr, the rich mistress of Haugh, the envied of half a county, crept back to her lonely bed, and lay still, occasionally stealing from the night a few minutes' dull unconsciousness from her many cares.





CHAPTER VIII.

"MARRIAGE IS A WOMAN'S MAKING OR UNDOING."

AT half-past six in the morning, when the maids rose, the master of Haugh came upstairs. There was a fire in his dressing-room; the ruddy glow shone in through the open door upon his wife's face, as she lay on the bed.

"Aren't you cold, Alec? I lit the fire."

"No, I'm all right," he murmured gruffly, "or will be presently, when I get my bath. What about the folk? I saw Kate downstairs. I bade her not waken Eleanor—and I said eight for breakfast."

"Yes, that's all right; I'll get up presently. I could sleep when it is time to get up."

"You were down at me in the night time again. How many times have I bidden ye let me abe? I know I'm a fool. You'd best leave me to that folly. I'll kill myself one day, and the sooner the better for you," he said, remorseful at the sight of his wife's wan face.

"I can't look at it like that, Alec," she said. "I'd do anything, make any sacrifice, to stop it."

"It would do no good—it's in the blood, I tell you. All the Kerrs have been hard drinkers. Can I expect to escape?" He asked, rather gloomily. Things looked dark just then. He was cold and stiff, and the white rime lay thick on the ground, and had got into his throat as he

went down to the stable to give orders about the carriage.

"According to that doctrine, Alec, Claud and Eleanor must fall too. I'm glad Claud is coming to-day, and glad these people will be gone before he comes."

"If Eleanor gets up there'll be tantrums, maybe, but I'm ready for them," said Kerr, grimly. "Upon my word, I think they're best off that have no bairns."

Mrs. Kerr lay still, after he went out, her face looking grey and solemn in the flickering light. She had paid dear for the privilege of writing herself mistress of Haugh; nor were her sorrows over yet. Nay, there were times when she told herself they were but beginning since the children had grown up. The love she had lacked towards their father had gone out passionately to them, and it was the travail of her soul to see them happy and contented and good. Above all, good; for her life with a husband who regarded neither God nor man, but was a law to himself in everything he did, had showed her how poor and mean and barren are this world's goods as weighed against the benediction of an upright and kindly life. She did not complain, because she felt in her inmost heart that she had earned these deserts. In the days long gone, a good man and true had loved her, and she him, but because he had only small things to offer her, she broke her troth, and sent him away. She had heard nothing of him these many years, except that he was in some far foreign place and doing well. Whether he had ever married, she sometimes wondered when her thoughts went back to that old romance which time and memory had hallowed, as nothing in her present life would ever be hallowed. She rather dreaded the next two hours, and wearily turning her head on the pillow, wished she could close her eyes till they had passed. But it had to be gone through like many another ordeal she had faced during the last twenty years.

By half-past seven she was dressed, and with that singular and quiet resolution which often distinguished her unexpectedly, she went to the door of Madame

Brabant's room, and lightly knocked. It was immediately opened by the lady, who assumed the air appropriate to the occasion, a kind of indifferent haughtiness which became her very well.

"Good morning, Madame," said Mrs. Kerr, quietly. "I hope you have everything you require. My husband has told me you are going this morning."

"Yes, we are going," said Madame, stiffly; "and I may be excused, perhaps, for saying that if this is a specimen of your Northern manners, I am glad to be spared any further acquaintance with them."

"We have done our best to make this visit enjoyable, Madame," replied Mrs. Kerr, her own dignity not lacking. "It is unfortunate that Mr. Kerr and your son did not agree last night, and you must see that, in the circumstances, it is better for you to go."

"Oh, no doubt! It is a misfortune to be poor, Mrs. Kerr. I never before had been made to feel my poverty so humiliating. My heart bleeds for my poor boy, with his high spirits and his Brabant pride, the only heritage they have given him. I have told him it will be better for him quickly to forget the dear child who has so won our hearts. She is not for us."

"It is better, Madame. Marriages between different nationalities are always a risk, and it is natural that we should wish to keep our only daughter as near home as possible."

"Yes, if you can," said Madame, rather significantly. "Poor Louis and she are devotedly attached to each other. It seems very cruel."

"Eleanor is still very young. She will soon forget."

"Louis is not so young, and he belongs to a race to whom fidelity is as dear as honour. How is the dear child this morning?"

"She is still asleep. Her father will not allow her to be disturbed. You will see, Madame, that in the circumstances it is better that she and your son should not meet again."

"Must we, then, go without a word of farewell?" cried Madame, aghast.

"Believe me, it will be better so."

Madame turned away and busied herself with the fastening of her trunk, and her face wore no pleasant look.

"You will, then, permit no communication, no letters?" she said presently.

"Mr. Kerr will not. Do you not see how desirable it is that there should be no doubt left in their minds about the future?"

"No hope, you mean. Poor Eleanor, poor Louis, to taste the bitter cup so soon. Mr. Kerr's decision, then, you also consider unalterable?"

"Entirely so. I have lived with him for four and twenty years, and I have never known him to go back on his spoken word."

"He is fortunate to have about him those who allow him such a prerogative. For myself, I question the good taste or wisdom of those who give in so abjectly to one man. It is always bad and unwholesome to be an autocrat. I have not seen your son; but I do not myself think Mr. Kerr will find his daughter so amenable as he thinks, or as her mother has been."

It was a rude personal speech, which Mrs. Kerr felt, but quietly ignored. Reminding Madame that the gong would go in ten minutes, she closed the door, and went to look at Eleanor.

Madame occupied a large chamber next the drawing-room, which was the latest addition to the house. It had been built for the present Mrs. Kerr. There was an old wing of the house behind, containing several quaint panelled rooms, and was approached by a narrow passage, shut off by a door. Eleanor had chosen her rooms in the old wing, and they had been put in order for her during her absence in Paris. When the passage door was shut she was quite shut off from the rest of the house. Mr. Kerr felt glad of the arrangement, which thus deadened any sound going on in the dining-room

or hall. Even the clang of the front door bell could scarcely be heard in the old wing. Mrs. Kerr was relieved to find Eleanor still sound asleep; she appeared scarcely to have stirred since her mother had been in before. She stole out again, and when she left the passage, closed the door, and, locking it, put the key in her pocket. Now that the rupture was made, it was much better that Madame should not intrude and make a scene with Eleanor. She could not help oddly smiling as she went downstairs with the little key in her pocket. A gleam of humour sometimes relieved the monotony of her life. In happier circumstances Alison Kerr would have been the merriest, most delightful of life-mates. The shadows on her life had killed her—she was old before her time.

Louis Brabant was in the dining-room; he turned eagerly at the opening of the door, but his face relapsed into sullenness at sight of Mrs. Kerr. He was in a very bad temper, and no object was to be gained by hiding it. He scarcely attempted to be civil to his hostess.

Directly the gong sounded, Mr. Kerr came in, followed by Madame, and without much talk the uncomfortable, unsociable meal began. No attempt at conversation was made, and all felt relieved when it was time to leave the table.

"May I be permitted to ask if Miss Kerr is well this morning?" said Brabant, as they rose.

"I have not seen her," replied Mr. Kerr. "Eleanor is well enough, I suppose?" he said, turning to his wife.

"She is quite well, but still asleep."

"Which means that I am not to see her," said Brabant. "Surely my mother will be allowed at least to say good-bye."

"What is the good? There will be a scene. No, she is not to be wakened," said Kerr, flatly.

Brabant elevated his brows; the carriage passed the window, and Madame hurried upstairs.

Mrs. Kerr followed her in time to behold her trying the handle of the passage door.

"Locked in! Quite mediæval," she said, mockingly, yet with a distinct air of chagrin. "Let me assure you, dear Mrs. Kerr, such extreme measures will not prevail with a high-spirited girl like Eleanor. They will only hasten and probably accomplish what you are trying to avoid."

"We take the risk," replied Mrs. Kerr, and there was no more said.

In ten minutes the carriage drove away, Mr. Kerr in it, determined to make sure of their departure from the Kinghorn station.

Mrs. Kerr gave a little gasp of relief when it disappeared down the avenue, and then she went up and unlocked the passage door. Before seeking Eleanor, she went back to her own dressing-room, where the fire burned brightly. Having put it straight and drawn a little table to the hearth-rug, she rang the bell.

"Bring some breakfast here for Miss Eleanor and a cup for me, Katie," she said. "I could take a bite now the folk are gone—and make Miss Eleanor's tray tempting."

The girl nodded and ran downstairs.

Then Mrs. Kerr went back to Eleanor's room and drew up the blind.

"Is it half-past eight already, Katie? Put back the clock," said Eleanor, sleepily.

"It's nine, dear; get up, and throw on your dressing-gown, and you and I will have a cosy breakfast in my room. Katie is just bringing it."

"In your room, mother!" repeated Eleanor, now wide awake. "Why, what has happened?"

"Nothing much. Get up, dear; here are your slippers, and come to me in the dressing-room. There's a nice fire, and we can have a talk," replied Mrs. Kerr, and immediately left the room in nervous haste; a great deal more afraid of her talk with Eleanor than of her words with Madame Brabant. Eleanor, thoroughly roused, and feeling sure something unusual had happened, made haste with her dressing, and came to her mother's room.

"Is breakfast over, mother? What is the meaning of all this?" she asked, as she opened the door.

"Yes, dear, breakfast is over, and your friends have gone away."

"Gone away!" repeated Eleanor, blankly. "Do you mean that they have left Haugh?"

"Yes. Your father has gone with them to the station to catch the nine train."

"And why, pray?"

Eleanor had grown quite white, and her eye flashed.

"You can guess. Mr. Brabant spoke to your father last night about you, and, as I warned you, he would not entertain such an idea for a moment, so they have gone away."

"And all this out of my knowledge! Do you think that papa has any right to treat me so—as if I were a baby, or a fool?"

She spoke passionately, and gave her foot a little stamp.

"I quite approve of your father's decision in this, my dear," replied her mother, quietly. "I should not care to see you the wife of Louis Brabant."

"And why? You have nothing against him, save only the narrow prejudices of this place. I say that to have sent away an honourable gentleman, without even giving him or me a chance, is inhuman."

"Take care, Eleanor. The house is your father's, and you are still under his jurisdiction," said Mrs. Kerr, slowly, and her lips blanched, for the discussion pained her inexpressibly.

"It shall not be for long," said Eleanor, proudly. "But I am not going to be set aside like this. I shall have it out with papa when he comes back."

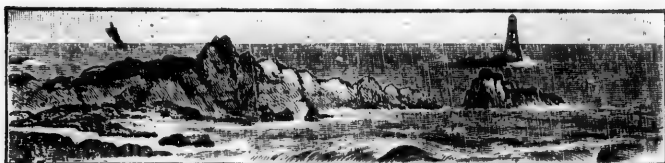
"I should advise you to say nothing to your father, to-day at least. He had not a pleasant interview with Mr. Brabant, and I rather think got the impression that he was more interested in your money than yourself. In a question of this kind it is not wise to hide the truth, however it may sting."

"It is most cruel to hint at such a thing," said Eleanor, with quivering lip. "But I cannot expect anything but suspicion and injustice. To order them out of the house without so much as letting me see them to say good-bye. What do you think of it, mother?"

"I thought it for the best; and I would do it again, Eleanor. I do not like these people, they are not to be trusted. Oh, my lassie, take my advice, I am well fitted to give it; don't pass by the gold for the dross, and remember that marriage is a woman's making or undoing. I grant that you feel sore and hurt just now, but it will pass if you don't brood over it. Let me assure you there is no use fighting against your father; his is the stronger will."

"That remains to be seen," said Eleanor, sullenly; and without another word spoken went back to her own room, leaving the breakfast tray untouched.





CHAPTER IX.

"GOD GIVE YOU A THANKFUL HEART."

HAVING watched the train steam away from the platform, Mr. Kerr sent the carriage on to the Post Office, and lingered about the gate waiting for the Castlebar gig, which brought Allardyce down every morning to catch his train. He had not long to wait, for it came rattling down the brae presently, and Allardyce sprang out.

"Good-morning! Who's travelling? Just met the carriage with the luggage tray on."

"The French folk are away," said Kerr, grimly.

"Come up the brae a bit—the signal isn't down."

Considerably astonished, Allardyce stepped on with him.

"What's up? I thought they'd come to make a long visit."

"So they thought—but they're away. It's my daughter and her money they're after, Rob, and I've given them the right-about face. Don't you think I was wise?"

"Did Mr. Brabant speak to you about Eleanor?"

"He did, last night, and I gave him my mind pretty freely. I'm not going to give my girl to any loafer that sees fit to ask her."

"Certainly not," said Allardyce, emphatically. "But there's Eleanor to be considered. My mother and I got the impression on Saturday night that they were in love with each other."

"Well, all they've got to do is to get out of love again, for I simply won't have it."

"What did Eleanor say to this summary dismissal?" inquired Allardyce, too vitally interested to attempt to hide it.

"Faith, I haven't seen her. It was after the women were in bed last night that the fellow spoke, and we took care that she didn't get up in time this morning. Her mother will have told her by now."

"I can't pretend to say I am sorry," said Allardyce. "Apart from any personal feeling in the matter, I am glad you are not going to give Miss Kerr to that French fellow; there's something about him one distrusts."

"Well, they're off, anyhow, and we've heard the end of it," said Kerr, with complacent assurance. "What I want to say particularly is that the sooner you make up to her the better I shall be pleased; you or Willie Heron, I really don't mind which. Hearts are sometimes caught in the rebound, I've heard; so, if she was a bit soft on Brabant, now's your chance."

Allardyce flushed, and looked much gratified.

"Thank you, Mr. Kerr. I shall act on your advice. There's the train, good-bye."

He darted back to the station, and leaping into a carriage, waved his hand from the window. He had got something to divert him from business matters for one day at least. Having in his own opinion thus finally and satisfactorily settled a passing annoyance, Mr. Kerr strode into the village for his letters and papers, which by calling he received an hour earlier than at Haugh. Then he went home. From the upper windows Mrs. Kerr saw the carriage come in at the gates, and ran down to meet her husband as he came in, looking well pleased with himself.

"Well, that's quick work. What's Eleanor saying to it?"

"Come in, Alec," she said, pushing open the dining-room door. "Eleanor isn't a baby. I'm afraid we haven't seen the end of the matter yet."

"Why, has she been terrifying you with a tantrum?"

"No, she is quiet enough. If she had made a scene I should like it better. But she is very bitter and rebellious, very rebellious; and now she will not speak to me."

"Oh, she'll come out of that; sulks soon cure themselves if nobody minds them. Where is she?"

"In her own room."

"I'd better go up and see her."

"I don't know whether you should. I have talked seriously and kindly to her, but she is in that mind that she won't see reason."

"I'd better see her, I think," said Kerr, moving to the door.

"Well, Alec, don't bully her; Eleanor won't stand shouting at, mind. She's not like me," said Mrs. Kerr, driven to a most unusual candour by her great anxiety.

"Have I bullied you so awfully, poor little woman?" he said, struck by the words. "This is the first time I have heard it. If I have bullied you, Alison, it's only been in the drink."

"Oh, yes, I was not blaming you, only be gentle with Eleanor, and remember that whatever we may think, she believes in these people and in their disinterested affection for her. Disillusionment is always hard on the young, just at first."

"All right. I'll let her down gently," said Kerr, and marched upstairs highly pleased with himself.

He gave a thundering rat-tat at his daughter's door, and receiving no answer, marched in. She was fully dressed and appeared to be occupying herself arranging the trifles on her dressing-table. She scarcely looked round at her father's entrance, and he saw that she was paler than usual, and that her mouth looked rather small and determined.

"Well, lassie," he said, with great good-humour, "your mother and I have stolen a march on you this morning, and you think it rather rough, perhaps, but you may trust us to know and to do what is best for you."

Eleanor made absolutely no response to this conciliatory speech; nor did her expression even indicate that she had heard.

"I hope you are not going to be sulky, and worry your mother about it," he said next, knocking the heel of his boot rather impatiently on the floor, "because it won't do any good, except aggravating me. I won't have your mother worried."

"By anybody but you," said Eleanor, with a curl of her lip. A most injudicious speech.

"You've got nothing to do with that, and you needn't be impudent, Eleanor," he said, rather hotly, his disposition not being inclined to stand much. "Your mother and I are satisfied that these Brabants are not fit friends for you, and we've put an end to the connection. I intend that it should be an end. There is to be no writing to and fro—do you hear?"

"I hear," said Eleanor, quietly, and with the same inscrutable expression of face.

"He'd never make you happy, that chap, Eleanor. You might see it in his eye; anyhow, he is not going to get the chance of making you miserable, and the sooner you turn your attention to a more likely man the better I shall be pleased."

Eleanor polished the back of her silver brush with her handkerchief, and laid it in its velvet case. It was somewhat ludicrous; the big, red-faced laird leaning rather awkwardly against the doorway, laying down the law to the slim, self-possessed maiden, of whose inner thoughts and mind he was as ignorant as the babe unborn.

"Well, as you won't speak, I'm going, and I hope there'll be no more of it, and just let me say that you will never regret trying to please me, Eleanor. I'll

grudge you nothing in reason, and I've got a new mount coming for you from Ireland, that'll take the shine off the best of them at the meet. Corbett's getting her for me, and I've told your mother to take you to Edinburgh, and order the most stylish habit they can make. I don't mind what it costs—I want you to look well and to have a jolly good time ; only, I won't have any nonsense, mind that."

"Your ideas are mediæval," said Eleanor, in a voice which had a peculiarly aggravating quality. As her father did not quite understand her, and did not want to ask an explanation, he merely said—"Humph," and walked away.

"She's a queer sort—I can't make her out," he said to his anxious wife downstairs.

"What did she say?" asked Mrs. Kerr.

"She didn't say anything. I don't think she's taken it badly, on the whole ; do you?"

"I think she is too quiet. I shall be able to tell you better in a day or two."

"Well, meanwhile, you must try and occupy her as much as possible. Take her over to Edinburgh, and buy some new gear for her. Never mind what you spend. And Claud's coming to-morrow ; that'll be a little diversion. Now, it's after ten o'clock, and I haven't done a hand's turn, and Dalrymple's rous at twelve. Women folk make ducks and drakes of a man's time."

He went off to the farm satisfied that everything was right at home, and that he had got a disagreeable duty over. Eleanor came down by and by, and beyond being distinctly quieter than usual, there was nothing to mark any inward disturbance. She was really stunned by the suddenness of the whole affair, and she did not believe the Brabants would go away to London without making the smallest attempt to see her, or learn her mind. She waited, therefore, for some further development. Meanwhile, she was quiet and a trifle sullen.

Mr. Kerr being absent at a displeasing sale several miles distant, his wife and daughter lunched alone, not

sociably, but Mrs. Kerr could not find any fault with Eleanor. She appeared subdued, and not particularly rebellious. Soon after lunch she put on her strong boots and went out to walk. It was still frosty, and the ground hard to the foot. Eleanor felt exhilarated by the pure, fresh, bracing air, and insensibly as she walked her spirits rose. It was impossible to be depressed under a sky so gloriously clear and blue, and with the great expanse of the sea stretching before her, the sun flashing brilliantly on its troubled breast. She walked straight across the fields and came out on the Burnt-island Road above the village; then made her way down to the shore over the old harbour of Pettycur. On a winter day it is a lonely spot, being quite shut in, and scarcely a house in sight. Eleanor saw a figure on the far end of the little pier, and as she drew nearer descried an easel and a camp-stool. A few steps more and she recognised the artist as Mary Heron of the old Manse. She walked right out the pier, and was close to the artist before she observed her coming.

"Well, I must say you are a devotee, Mary Heron," was her greeting. "What on earth do you mean sitting out on a day like this?"

"I've got to do it—that's why," said Mary, as she rose. "How do you do, Eleanor? I saw you in the kirk yesterday at a very respectable distance."

They shook hands, but not very cordially. They did not adore each other—nay, there was a certain antipathy between them, though they had played together as bairns, and shared the same lessons for many a day.

"Got to do it, have you; is it a commission?" asked Eleanor, looking with interest at the easel.

"Yes, it's for Bailie Chisholm, and he wants to give it to his wife for Christmas, that's on Saturday, Eleanor, and it's got to be framed yet."

"But it's quite finished, isn't it?—and it is lovely."

"Do you really like it?" asked Mary, a little wistfully, for she had grown tired of her work, and saw but little beauty in it.

"I should think I do—why, these waves live. I hope Mrs. Bailie Chisholm will appreciate it."

"I don't mind whether she does or not, so long as I get the Bailie's money," said Mary; and her sweet mouth took a curious bitterness as she folded up her camp-stool. There was a great contrast between the two girls, and both were conscious of it. Eleanor, tall and stately, wearing a warm winter coat trimmed richly with brown fur, and a dainty felt hat—everything in the best of style and taste—seemed to overshadow the little artist in her shabby cashmere frock and worn old-fashioned jacket, threadbare at the elbows. For the moment Eleanor Kerr could think of nothing to say. She had imagined her own troubles unequalled and intolerable, and now felt momentarily rebuked before this insignificant little woman, who had to solve the problem of how to live, and to whom the bare necessities of life were at times almost unattainable.

"How is Mrs. Heron?" she asked, and the very keenness of her feeling gave to her tongue a certain abruptness.

"About the same. She was talking of getting up when I came out. I begged her to wait till I ran out to do this—there are so few days in December one can get a sunlight effect on the water. Now, I must hurry home."

"How is Willie? Is he not at home just now?"

"No, he is staying with the Aitkens, and will remain over Christmas. It is a great thing for him to be intimate with such a well-known R.S.A. It has come to that, that even art requires an influential push to make it boom."

Eleanor looked at her curiously. She had never known Mary in such a bitter mood. She had not the smallest idea of the pressure of circumstances that had conduced to it. That very afternoon the weary girl had looked into the green depths of the sea where they stood and wondered whether it would be a great sin to end it all, and whether God, who knew everything, would be very hard on a weak woman who had found life a burden too

heavy to be borne. It was seldom that Mary Heron, who was a healthy-minded girl, free from everything morbid, took such a dark view, but she had eaten nothing that day except a bit of toast with her morning cup of tea, and there would be no substantial fare in the old Manse till Bailie Chisholm paid for his wife's Christmas gift. The absolute straits to which the Herons were reduced were not known even to their intimate friends—theirs was the poverty which could bear an empty stomach, but loathed charity.

"I thought you had guests at Haugh," she said, presently, as she folded up her easel. "Do none of them care for a country walk?"

"They went away to-day," replied Eleanor, and her brow grew dark.

"To-day!" echoed Mary, in surprise. "Why, I thought they only came on Friday, and Mrs. Allardyce told me they were going to make quite a visit."

"They went away to-day," replied Eleanor, and for the moment the impulse to confide in her old school friend was strong upon her.

"Then it isn't true you are going to marry the French gentleman?"

"I can't tell you anything about it," replied Eleanor, harshly. Mary took the snubbing serenely. Her own cares were so heavy, nothing outside of them had the power to touch her. She was engaged in wondering what little variations she could make in tea and toast to render it palatable to her invalid mother's taste.

"I hope you're not. Nobody wants you to go away from Kinghorn, and you know you needn't, Eleanor, unless you like."

"I wouldn't like to spend my days here. Now I've seen something of life, the place seems more narrow and intolerable than ever."

Mary shut her easel straps with a snap, and turned with a sudden passion in her face.

"God forgive you, Eleanor," she said, solemnly, "and give you a thankful heart."



CHAPTER X.

"HAPPINESS DOES NOT COME BY TRYING."

"LET me carry that for you," said Eleanor, and Mary allowed her to take the easel.

"Mamma is in bed, or I'd ask you to come up and see her. You will come up one day, won't you?" said Mary, wondering that Eleanor took the outburst so meekly.

"Yes, I'll come one day very soon, tell Mrs. Heron. Is your brother likely to get any of his pictures in this year?"

"I think so. Mr. Aitken says they will all get in, and mine as well. He is quite enthusiastic over Willie just now. Of course, if he gets them in, and they are sold, it will make a great difference to us."

"I hope he will," said Eleanor, sincerely. She was at her best at the moment. The delicious fresh wind from the sea, which made poor Mary feel sick and faint with hunger, gave to Eleanor, who had substantially lunched, a sense of delicious physical exhilaration, and having been brought face to face with the trouble of another, her own seemed less gigantic and absorbing.

"I shouldn't mind coming up now and having a cup of tea with you," she said, presently. "Mrs. Heron wouldn't resent an unceremonious visit from me."

Mary painfully coloured. She could not say she had nothing to offer a guest, and she was too frank and straight by nature to prevaricate successfully.

"Another day might be better," she said at length. "Mamma was rather fretful this morning, and I told you she was not up."

"All right—I'll come another day. I'm going into the village, and it will soon be time for the afternoon post."

The thought caused her pulses to beat a little faster. It was just possible that the Brabants remained in Edinburgh and would communicate with her before proceeding further. She turned her head and gave a swift, yearning glance across the tossing expanse from which the fleeting radiance had already faded. The city could be plainly discerned—its spires and towers standing out dimly above the frosty haze that lay upon the lower slopes.

"Claud may be home to-night," she said presently.

"I heard he was coming soon. You have not seen him for a whole year."

"No, but we have survived it. We, Claud and I, are not particularly devoted. All the same, it will be rather nice to have him home again. You go this way, well, good-bye."

"Good-bye."

They shook hands with rather more warmth than they had done at meeting, and went their separate ways. Mary took the short cut to the old Manse across the braes and by the cemetery gates, then across the end of the golf links. The Manse stood in the shelter of a little hill, and had a glimpse of the sea between two rounded slopes of the braes. It was an old-fashioned, rather tumble-down cottage, standing in a roomy garden, which was in a state of sad neglect. The interior of the house, however, was very neat and clean, though somewhat bare. The more substantial articles of furniture once possessed by the Herons had been sacrificed one by one to meet pressing need. The front sitting-room,

however, looked very artistic and dainty, having been arranged and kept by Mary's clever fingers. She laid her things on the little hall table, put a match to the fire already laid, and ran upstairs.

"I'm sure I haven't been long, mamma," she said, cheerily, "and now I'm quite ready to get you up, and you shall have some hot water directly."

"Not long!" said a querulous voice from the bed. "I thought you had been ages, and it is nearly dark. You just go out and forget all about me."

"It is all the other way," said Mary, with unassailable good-humour. "I can't work for thinking about you. Why, who's this coming here?—it's the phaeton from Castlebar. Mrs. Allardyce driving herself. Well, she can't come in—that's all."

"I just knew how it would be. Now, if you'd had me up in time, I should have been downstairs, and could have had a nice talk with Mrs. Allardyce. I never see anybody, and it's deadly dull here—but you don't care."

"Now, mamma, don't be silly," said Mary, firmly. "If you'll be quick, see, you can get down in your dressing-gown in time to see her. She's only coming round the lane now."

Mrs. Heron began to get up with extraordinary rapidity considering her infirm state. Mary could not forbear a little smile as she helped her to dress. She was very gentle with her mother's weakness, though she knew very well much of it was assumed. By the time Mrs. Allardyce's loud, cheery, characteristic knock sounded through the house, Mrs. Heron was nearly ready to receive her.

"You go down. I can put on my cap myself. There's my white shawl—no, not that—the crepe one. There, that'll do. Get out the best china, and offer Mrs. Allardyce some tea."

"Mother, I can't—you must not suggest it, mind, for there isn't any butter, and only a stale loaf," said Mary, hurriedly, and ran down to open the door.

Mrs. Allardyce stood on the doorstep, puffing with the heat of her big sealskin cloak, and the weight of a huge basket she had carried up the garden with her own hands.

"How are you, my dear? No—I'm no' comin' in, for I've to be at the station to meet Robert at five minutes to four. This is your Christmas dinner, and there's two chuckies ready cooked, for ye havna much time for cooking. How's your mother?"

"She's just up, and wants very much to see you; do come in just a minute," said Mary, and her eyes were glistening.

"Well, I'll come till ye empty the basket, for it's one I'm aye needin'. Mercy, is that her on the stair? She's surely a hantle better."

In her haste and fear lest she should miss her visitor, Mrs. Heron had forgotten her weakness, and now came quite briskly downstairs. She was a very pretty woman, and her appearance was very lady-like. Mary felt quite proud of her as she ran to give her her arm into the sitting-room. Then leaving the two to their talk, she carried the big basket into the kitchen and began to unpack its contents. What a wealth of good things! There was the turkey stuffed and trussed ready for the oven, and the sausages for garnishing; then there were dozens of new-laid eggs and pats of yellow butter, and a great pile of scones, such as could only be tasted at Castlebar. Shall I write down, I wonder, that Mary, forgetful of everything but her hunger, took a great mouthful from one, being unable to resist it? So many good things had not been seen in the old Manse for many a long day.

"I thought I had better be forehanded wi' my Christmas for fear ye had ordered your dinner," said Mrs. Allardyce, cheerily, to Mrs. Heron. "Woman, ye are just looking fine. We'll get you up to Castlebar yet."

Mrs. Heron shook her head, and immediately remembered her invalid state.

"I only wish I was, it's so dull here, and young people

are so thoughtless. Mary went out all this afternoon and left me alone."

"She had to go, no doubt, for Mary is a good lassie, that does more than her duty," said Mrs. Allardyce, warmly.

"I never hear anything that's going on. Mary told me yesterday that Miss Kerr had come back to Haugh. When is Claud coming, do you know?"

"The night or the morn, I believe. There's no much news gaun the now, Mrs. Heron. Come you up to Castlebar, and I'll gather a the bits I can for ye," said Mrs. Allardyce, with gentle banter. "Mary, I wis saying your mother will be up to us yet; she is much better, isn't she?"

"Sometimes. Yes, I think she is better, dear Mrs. Allardyce. I can't thank you. Mother, I only wish you saw what is on the kitchen table."

"Wheesht, woman, it's just naething ava. Well, good-bye, Mrs. Heron, and if ye be ower lang o' comin' to Castlebar, I'll come and see you again."

"I might drive up if it is a fine day. If you see Miss Kerr, tell her I'd like to see her, if she has not got too proud."

"I saw her this afternoon in Pettycur, mother, and she wanted to come up, only I didn't let her," Mary hastened to say. "I am sure she will come one day very soon."

Mrs. Heron looked resigned; her expression indicating that she intended to bear the slights heaped upon her with exemplary patience. Adversity had brought to the front the selfish side of Mrs. Heron. There had been a day when, as the wife of a city clergyman, she had done good work unselfishly and conscientiously. She had sunk under the pressure of her troubles, and had become a burden to herself and a care to all connected with her. Willie Heron, indeed, found a long spell of his mother's companionship beyond his endurance, and spent as much time as possible away from the old Manse. Only for Mary, year in and year out, no respite came.

"Lassie, ye are a bit weary-faced," said Mrs. Allardyce, kindly, to the girl, as they walked down the garden path together.

"I am all right, Mrs. Allardyce, thank you," said Mary, hurriedly, and on the verge of tears. "Did you know the French people had gone away from Haugh?"

"No; nor have they, that I've heard."

"They went this morning. Eleanor told me herself."

"Imphm!" said Mrs. Allardyce, with a mingling of wonder and satisfaction. "Well, I would not call that ill news, but I wonder what's happened?"

"Eleanor is much improved in appearance. Don't you think her very handsome?"

"Handsome is that handsome does," replied Mrs. Allardyce, pointedly.

"But she isn't happy. Isn't it a queer thing, Mrs. Allardyce, that folk who have no troubles never lose any time in making them? I don't know a girl more to be envied than Eleanor Kerr, yet she is as discontented as she can be."

"The Almichty will gie her her sittin' doon, my dear. He mak's a'thing even sune or late. Them that live longest see maist."

Mrs. Allardyce could not get the girl's face out of her mind as she drove down to the village. She saw that something worse than usual was troubling her, and puzzled herself as to what it could be, having no idea of the absolute destitution to which the Herons were reduced.

Meanwhile Eleanor had walked to the Post Office, only to be disappointed. She still believed that the Brabants had gone no further than Edinburgh, whereas they were at that very moment drinking a hasty cup of tea at Grantham. As she retraced her steps towards home, she saw Robert Allardyce coming up the station brae, his train having just arrived. Not averse to meeting him, she stood still and waited.

"How do you do? I thought you usually drove home."

"So I do. My mother promised to come and meet me to-day, but I see no sign of her. Something must have detained her. I need hardly ask if you are well."

It was impossible for him to help throwing a certain tender significance into his voice, and she did not resent it. She was at the age when homage is due and sweet, and it was something to have such a handsome fellow as Rob Allardyce waiting on her smile. It would, at least in the absence of anything more acceptable or exciting, give a little zest to existence.

"Do you think I look well?" she asked, with a look which set his pulses all aglow.

"If I said what I thought you would certainly snub me," he said, rather gravely. "Are you walking home? May I have the honour—?"

"No, you mayn't, for there is your mother coming. At least, I think that's a Castlebar pony I see."

"Yes, it is," said Allardyce, with a distinct note of disappointment in his voice. "But you'll let us drive you up."

"Oh, no, thank you. I'd rather walk. I came out to walk. I wanted my bad temper blown away."

She quite expected him to put the same question that Mary Heron had asked, but he remained discreetly silent.

"Isn't this a hole to support existence in?" she asked, giving a contemptuous wave towards the scattered houses of the village. "And this is only Christmas. I shall be insane before summer comes. There is only about three months in the year in which life at Haugh is possible."

"I am sorry to hear you say that. Many have looked forward to your return. Perhaps you will settle down more contentedly presently. It is wonderful what a lot of quiet enjoyment we manage to extract from existence even in a hole like this."

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common-sense left, nor was he afraid to speak his mind when he differed from her.

She detected his rebuke, nor did she resent it. Strong-minded and self-opinionated herself, she despised weakness in others. A man with the courage of his convictions always inspired her respect.

"Well, if I change my mind I'll let you know. Meanwhile, I am pretty sick of everything."

"I saw your father this morning, and he told me your friends had left," he said, daringly.

Her colour rose, and he saw her eyes flash.

"Yes—papa's education is about to begin," she said, curtly. "Perhaps that will make life tolerable at Haugh."

Allardyce felt nonplussed. It was difficult to frame an answer to such a speech.

"You will give him credit, at least, for having your interests at heart," he ventured to say.

"I don't know. He drinks too much whisky," she replied, flatly, and looked him straight in the face. She spoke the truth, but there are times when the truth smarts unpleasant. Allardyce was old-fashioned enough to wish in her the disposition to hide her father's fault.

"Your mother wears well," she said, presently. "Even that awful bonnet can't disguise the fact that she is a handsome woman."

Allardyce looked gratified. In another moment the little carriage would be upon them. If he had anything more to say he must say it now.

"Eleanor, we were all glad to have you back at Haugh—some of us thought it long till the day came. Hearts are true in the Kingdom," he began, boldly.

"You put it very prettily. You deserve that I should say I wish I had never gone away," she said, sincerely.

"We often wished that, but we can forget it, if only you will try and be happy among us."

"Happiness does not come by trying. The more one tries the further away it goes. It is spontaneous or nothing."

"One day you may be spontaneously happy here, then."

She shook her head.

"It is not so easy to cage a bird when it has once been strong on the wing. The mistake was in sending me away."

"But that restless feeling will pass. You know what it has been to me to have you away, what it is to see you back."

"We are getting too sentimental," she said, calmly. "How do you do, Mrs. Allardyce? You may thank me for keeping your son in good humour. No, I won't drive, thank you. Good-bye."

She walked off straight and slim as a poplar tree, and never once looked back.



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CHAPTER XI.

"I WANT YOU TO BE GOOD."

BEFORE dinner that same evening Claud arrived unexpectedly. He hired from the hotel and drove up to Haugh, arriving just as Eleanor came downstairs to the drawing-room. Her face brightened as she heard the familiar tones of her brother's voice outside the door, and she ran down to meet him.

"Oh, Claud, thank goodness you've come!" she said, as she threw open the door.

"Hulloa, Nell!—by Jove, you're got up to kili. Well, upon my word!"

He held her at arm's length, and looked her all over with wondering and approving pride.

"Is there a party, or what?" he asked—"because my dress togs aren't here yet."

"No, no, it isn't a party—there's nobody here," she said, a little quickly. "You have improved, too, Claud, ever so much, and I think, if you ask me, that we are a very good-looking pair."

"Right you are, Nell. It is rather nice to get home, especially now you're here."

She helped him off with his big coat—her white hands gleaming like marble against the rough tweed, and her face, lit up by her genuine pleasure, was distinctly

beautiful. To say that Claud was amazed at the change in his sister but mildly expresses his feelings. Perhaps his own words, that he was "struck all of a heap," best describe his state of mind. His own appearance was not to be despised. He was big and broad and fair, with a ruddy, well-favoured face, and light-brown hair cropped close to his head. His eyes were blue, gently and kindly as Eleanor's were piercing, and his mouth was as mobile as a woman's—a great deal more so than Eleanor's, which gave expression to all the family strength of mind. Claud was his mother's son.

"And how's mater and the governor?" he asked, in the most appropriate phraseology of his day and generation; "and how's things generally?"

"You'll soon find out. The gong will go in five minutes. I suppose you want to wash your hands? Mamma, here's Claud."

He did not allow her to get downstairs, but caught her on the landing, and kissed her in a fashion which had lost none of its boyish heartiness.

"The prodigal returns," he said, banteringly, yet with a very real tenderness. "You only look so-so, mother. Eleanor's stolen all the roses growing at this time of the year."

Mrs. Kerr could not speak—her heart was full. She had both her children under her roof once more, and God above knew how she yearned over them.

"Why didn't you telegraph, so that we could meet you?"

"Well, I meant to stay all night in Edinburgh, but there was a beastly haar on, so I thought I'd better come on. Governor well?"

"Yes, go to his dressing-room; you can wash there while you talk. There is the gong."

He nodded, gave her another kiss, and went whistling to his father's room. Mrs. Kerr turned to Eleanor with sunshine on her face.

"Isn't he a fine big fellow, Eleanor? Aren't you proud of your brother?"

"Yes, he's a manly specimen, which is something to be thankful for in these degenerate days. It is to be hoped he'll enliven us a bit."

He did—if the dinner-table talk was any criterion. It was long, indeed, since there had been such a merry, sociable, happy meal at Haugh. His high spirits were infectious and irresistible, and his account of his life as an English country gentleman interested and amused them very much. Eleanor's sharp criticisms and comments seemed to act as a fillip, and Claud appeared in the new rôle of entertainer. They lingered half-an-hour longer than usual, but when his mother and sister went upstairs he remained to smoke a cigar with his father. They had not got on very well heretofore, and the departure of Claud to Cheshire twelve months ago had only taken place in time to prevent an open rupture. Both were hot-tempered, and, though setting a poor example himself, the sight of his son drifting into indolent and dissipated habits had exasperated Alexander Kerr past all endurance. But all that was forgotten in the happiness of the present meeting, and as the laird poured out his first glass of whisky he felt at peace with all mankind.

"Here's good luck to you then, lad. Have a taste?"

Claud coloured, and shook his head.

"No, thank you. I'm going to steer clear of it. I wrote my mother I should when I came home. I'd better stick to my word."

"Certainly. I'm glad to hear you say that, for I hear you have not stuck to it all the time you've been away. But we'll let bygones be bygones. Well, what do you think of Eleanor?"

"I think she's stunningly handsome. Did you ever see such an improvement in anybody?"

"She's turned out well. Ought to do well for herself in the marrying line, eh?"

"I should think so; and she will, too; she's not the sort to take up with any Tom, Dick, or Harry."

"So you'd think to look at her; but we've had the



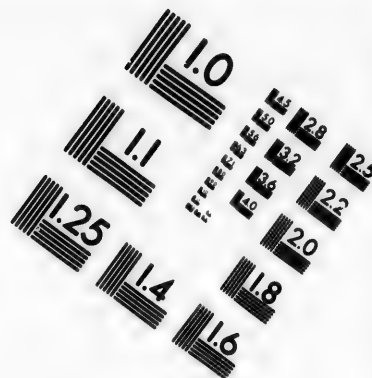
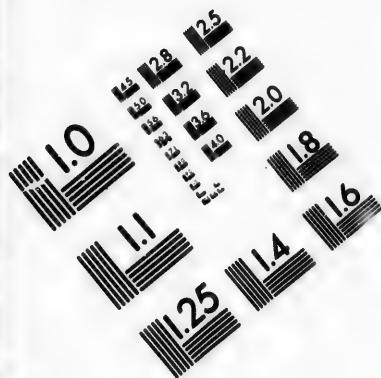
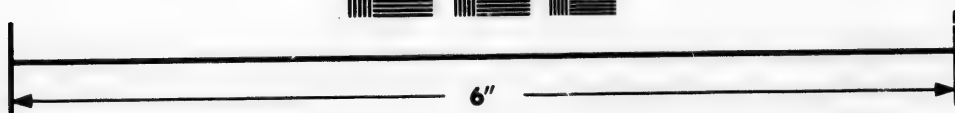
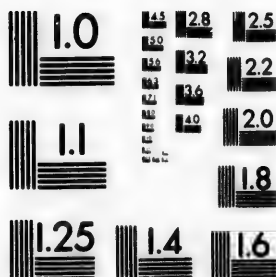


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devil of a kickup here already ; only put a stop to this morning. Did your mother write that she was bringing some French folk with her ? ”

Claud nodded.

“ I expected to find them here.”

“ So you would, probably ; only the fellow, an adventurer, nothing more nor less, had the impudence to tell me he was going to marry her.”

“ Phew ! ” said Claud, with a prolonged whistle. “ So you cut up rough.”

“ I kicked him out.”

“ And what did she say ? ”

“ Nothing—at least not much ; nothing to me worth recording. I don’t mean that she’ll run off with the first man that asks her. I’ve got my eye on two—she can have her choice.”

“ Who are they ? ”

“ Allardyce and Willie Heron.”

“ Allardyce will do ; but Will hasn’t a cent. to his name, not a red cent.”

“ He’ll make it ; he’s got brains. I heard of him in Edinburgh the other day. Some of the chaps high up in his line of business—I don’t understand it myself—but there’s money in it when you’ve made your name. Well, some of them think he’s the coming man.”

“ Rob’s a steady, good fellow, father. I hope she’ll take him.”

“ Well, it would give your mother and me an easy mind. I think it’ll be all right. Well, now you’ve come home, I’ve a bit of news for you. I’ve all but closed for the purchase of Annfield. It’s a nice little place. I’m getting it cheap, too. It will be something for you to occupy yourself with, and if you want to get married you could live there as long as we had Haugh.”

“ You’re very generous, father, and I’m awfully glad, really. Loafing about here is very bad for a fellow, and there isn’t enough work for two so long as you are as strong as you are, and I hope you’ll long be so,” he added, sincerely.

Mr. Kerr, inclined to be talkative, proceeded to expatiate on his plans, arranging the future of all and sundry ; constituting himself a kind of minor Providence. It is not so easy, however, to induce those we plan for to fall in with our arrangements, however wise and fitting they may be. Claud thought so as he listened, but made no demur.

It was now eight o'clock. A groom who had been down at the village on an errand brought back some letters that had come by the evening train ; one was taken up to Miss Kerr. Her mother was dozing in her easy-chair ; and Eleanor was glad of it. She slipped the letter into her pocket, and after a few minutes stole away to her own room to read it. It was the farewell of Louis Brabant to the girl he had never loved ; a few words hastily scrawled in pencil that morning at the Waverley Station.

"Dearest," it began, "I may permit myself that priceless privilege for the last time. Fate has decreed that we part. I feared all through that it would be too much happiness for a son of our unfortunate house. Your father is inexorable ; there is absolutely no hope, and nothing is left for me but to accept the inevitable. Mine is the harder fate. You may find one to console you, I, meeting my fate later in life, never shall. But you will marry one worthier than I, and I shall try to think only of your happiness. I lay my heart at your feet in a last passionate farewell.—LOUIS."

This melodramatic epistle was sufficient to move the proud Miss Kerr to tears, passionate tears of mortification and bitter pain. It was her first love affair, and she imagined herself stricken to the heart. The meretricious attractions of Louis Brabant had made a deep impression for the time being, and she felt as if the light had gone out of life. She sat still a long time, with the letter in her hand. Once she pressed it to her lips, then, suddenly recalling herself, and knowing she would be missed, she carefully locked the precious missive in her jewel-case and returned to the drawing-room—where Claud

had joined his mother. Eleanor saw that she had disturbed a conversation of which she was the theme.

"I can go away again," she said, with rather unpromising bluntness. "I see you are discussing my shortcomings."

"We were talking of you, dear, but not necessarily blaming you," said her mother, gently.

Claud felt inclined to make use of one of his favourite repartees, and say, "Shut up!" but reflecting that he must not be too frank just at present, he held his peace.

"Come in, Nell, and don't cut up rough," he said, banteringly. "Is this war paint to be the order of the day now, and is anything to match required in the male persuasion?"

"Claud, I wish you wouldn't be so irredeemably vulgar. Mamma, is Claud to be allowed to bring all his dreadful slang in here?" she said, crossly.

His mother smiled at him indulgently.

"It will not hurt us, dear, and I am afraid I am irredeemably vulgar, too—for I like it—the result of being one girl among six brothers."

"People of good family don't talk so," said Eleanor, loftily.

"That's all rot," replied Claud, cheerfully. "There was a cousin of Mrs. Stanfield's, an earl's son, at London, and he taught me all the new ones. Edinburgh is not a patch on Cambridge slang. I'll open your eyes in a day or two."

"I don't see what you want to use such ugly expressions for—there are plenty of words in the dictionary."

"Oh, come, Nell, don't be so rough on a fellow first night he's home, and him so awfully glad to see you. Mummy, I will be good, and put out the cigarette if *you* want me to."

He had the look which can win any woman's heart. Eleanor gave a little laugh, and dropped a little kiss on his head.

"You are incorrigible, Claud. You want a strong-minded woman to take you in hand."

"And you a strong-minded man, eh? so we are quits. Now, I want to hear all about the neighbours. Allardyce, I suppose, is flourishing? Do you ever see anything of the Herons?"

A close observer would have detected a certain vivid interest in Claud's eye as he asked the questions, though his manner was quite careless.

"I saw Mary to-day. You used rather to admire her, but I thought she had gone off in looks, to-day," said Eleanor.

"I think she has a hard time of it with that disagreeable mother of hers. Of course we are sorry to see her so poorly, but really she is very trying," said Mrs. Kerr, permitting herself unusual latitude in the matter of blame.

"Are they still painting pictures?" asked Claud.

Eleanor nodded.

"Mary was finishing a sketch to-day for Mrs. Bailie Chisholm, a beautiful thing. I hope they paid her well for it."

"Did you leave your father in the dining-room?" asked Mrs. Kerr quite suddenly.

"No, he went to the smoking-room."

"Don't you think we had better join him?" she said, rising.

"If you like," said Claud. Eleanor did not immediately follow them, and Mrs. Kerr detained Claud a moment on the stairs as they went down.

"Claud, I trust you will be a help and not a hindrance to your father, now," she said, earnestly.

Her look, wistful and pathetic, touched him.

"I will, mother. I mean to be awfully steady. See if I don't. And I think the governor has been awfully generous buying Annfield."

"You will need to get a wife. If I saw you with a good wife, settled at Annfield, and Eleanor mistress at Castlebar, my troubles would be over, Claud."

"Well, I hope I won't give you any more trouble, mother," said the lad, sincerely. "I have tried hard, but somehow things are too strong for a fellow, and then he gets reckless. You see the Kerrs have always been a wild set."

"They have been, but they need not always be," she said, quickly. "I do not like to hear you quote your father on this point, Claud. It is possible, with determination, to make even a dark record clean. Oh, my boy, I do want you to be good!"

A momentary dimness clouded his bright face, and with a demonstration of affection most unusual he stooped and kissed her.

"Mother, I'll try, so help me, God," he said, solemnly, and the words sounded like a vow.





CHAPTER XII.

"WILL YOU BE MY WIFE?"

ELEANOR seemed to be pursued by a perpetual and increasing restlessness. She could not be quiet indoors. As the frost-bound and icy state of the roads forbade riding, she walked; and many people commented on the frequent appearance of Miss Kerr on the roads both near and remote from her home. In the house she was civil, but neither sociable nor cordial. Claud was greatly taken up with his new estate of Annfield, where he spent the greater part of every day, otherwise he would have been quick to observe that his sister was not quite herself. Mrs. Kerr observed it, and worried over it in secret. She had not been able to win her daughter's confidence, and there was little in common between them. Mrs. Kerr was a home-loving and housewifely woman, who did not approve of ladies riding to hounds, or taking part in any other pronounced exercises. Eleanor had no taste for the gentler avocations supposed to be the province of her sex—she rode fearlessly, and loved to be in at the death. She took interest in questions men discussed, and wondered how her mother could be bored with the details of housekeeping and visiting and petty feminine affairs. One truly feminine attribute, however, she did possess—a love of pretty clothes. She dressed

exquisitely—and as her father's allowance was liberal, she was able to gratify almost every whim.

Mrs. Kerr felt that the year's absence abroad had alienated her daughter from her still more ; and the gulf between them was very wide. Mrs. Kerr mourned over it in secret—as for Eleanor, bitter experience was to teach her the priceless value of the motherly love she now held so lightly.

So far as Mrs. Kerr knew, the Brabant episode was at an absolute end. She was not aware, of course, that Eleanor had received any communication from them whatsoever, and that it had been duly replied to. Madame Brabant had also written, and though the letter came with the ordinary morning mail to Haugh, nobody observed it, and Eleanor said nothing. It gave her what she desired above all things to know—the present plans of her friends. It was a relief to her to learn that they intended to remain for the present in London, pending the production of a little play written by Adrian, under the auspices of the Rickmans. To Eleanor that London life among those Bohemians seemed Elysium, from which she was shut out. After the receipt of Madame Brabant's letter her restlessness seemed to increase, followed in the house by a vague, listless apathy quite painful to behold. Fearing this unhealthy state of mind would affect her health, Mrs. Kerr spoke of it to her one afternoon after lunch, at which she had been conspicuously silent.

"My dear, I wish to speak to you," she began, in her gentle, nervous way. "I have been watching you, and I do not think you are very happy or contented."

"I hate to be watched," replied Eleanor, suddenly, almost rudely.

"Even by those who love you," said her mother, sadly. "All love is watchful. I wish you would speak now to me quite frankly ; my dear, I can see very well there is something on your mind."

"There is nothing on my mind except what will be on it so long as I live here. It is quite true I am dis-

contented. It is a living death in this stagnant place. I really do feel that if something doesn't happen soon I shall do something desperate."

"I wish you were not so different from other girls. It is not so dull here, I am sure," said Mrs. Kerr, perplexedly. "People are constantly coming and going, and there are invitations, too, only you won't accept them."

"It is no change. We meet the same people and hear the same county gossip. It sickens me," said Eleanor. "I wish I had never been born."

"Tell me what you would like. We can give a dance at Annfield if you like, for Claud. If only you would take some interest in it, your father, I am sure, would grudge no expense."

"Is it worth the expense or the trouble?" asked Eleanor, and her manner angered her mother, who was so seldom given to wrath.

"Eleanor, God will punish you for your ingratitude," she said, quickly. "You are surrounded with blessings which you trample under foot, all because one whim was thwarted. I do not know why I should have borne such an ungrateful child; for though I have had and have my own sorrows, I have never yet seen a day pass without being able to thank God for something."

"You force me to say things, mother. I only want to be let alone. I interfere with nobody," said Eleanor, passionately.

"No, but your face is enough to cast a shadow in the sunshine; and even our neighbours are beginning to notice something odd about you. Don't you think, dear, there is a great deal of selfishness in this way of going on?"

"I only want to be let alone," repeated Eleanor, sullenly.

"Well, you have been let alone; but now I think it my duty to speak. If only you would look around at the lives of others it might awaken you to a sense of your own privileges. Look no further than the old

Manse. How would you like to be in poor Mary Heron's place?"

"I am sick of having Mary Heron thrown at me; she has one advantage I am denied—the right to use her abilities as she likes, and to choose her own lot in life. I am never allowed for a moment to forget that I am Miss Kerr of Haugh. I don't know what will be the end of it."

"Nor I," said her troubled mother with a sigh.

Secretly touched and ashamed, Eleanor went off for her afternoon walk, without suffering her momentary softening to appear. Mrs. Kerr sat down with her crewel-work in the window, and when she had watched the lithe, straight figure out of sight, her eyes wandered back to the grey and quiet sea, which lay stilly under a brooding sky, the seabirds low on the wing above it, screaming shrilly in presage of a coming storm. As she looked, something of the peace and mildness it suggested stole into her troubled heart, and the wearied look slowly died out of her face. By and by she buried her head in her hands and prayed in a low whisper the strange prayer—"God give me my children's souls, for Christ's sake." Eleanor strode on in her usual purposeful way, choosing short cuts through the crisp fields until she came into the highroad midway between Kinghorn and the neighbouring town. She had a letter in her pocket she wished to post away from the little village where everybody's correspondence was a matter of personal interest to his neighbour, and where small reticence was observed regarding the same. The distance was three miles, which Eleanor's strong, fleet feet speedily covered. The road was dreary in the extreme; bare, treeless, unpicturesque, winding up hill and down dale between stone dykes until it emerged in the rough causeway of Kirkcaldy streets. She posted her letter, bought one or two trifles at the shops, and set out again in the dusk to walk home. As she passed Allardyce's office, a large, handsome building in the main street, he came out on the steps in good time to catch his train.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Kerr," he said, quickly, his face flushing at sight of her. "We don't often see you in Kirkcaldy. Are you driving?"

"No, walking," she answered, shaking hands with him cordially enough.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"But surely you are not going to walk back?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, it is getting dark, and it is a roughish road. You'd better come back in the train with me. We have just time to get to the station comfortably."

"I'd rather walk; and, besides, I have no money to buy my ticket with."

Allardyce broadly smiled.

"I suppose it would be a deadly insult to offer it to you?"

"You needn't be rude. I don't want it, thank you," said Eleanor, and the rich colour in her cheek made her look her loveliest. "I am going to walk. Good-afternoon. It is just possible I may arrive as soon as you."

"I'll walk with you," said Allardyce, decidedly.

"Pray, don't. I should not take such advantage of your politeness. I shall get home before dark, and I assure you I am not at all afraid." Secretly she had been rather nervous several times as she walked in, but nothing would have made her admit it.

"Don't be silly, Eleanor," he said, with most daring frankness. "You know it will be dark before you get to Seafeld, and the road is infested with tramps. I am sure your father would be very uneasy and displeased if he thought you were alone on the road at this time of night."

"It's only four o'clock in the day," she said, obstinately. "I'll go in the train with you rather than make you walk."

"You can't—we've missed it," he observed, calmly. "If you'll turn I'll drive you with all the pleasure in life."

If not, let's set out. It is not every day in my life I get so rare a chance."

"Pray, are you going to subject me to such remarks all the way?" she asked, with a certain sauciness.

"I don't know; it depends on yourself," he said, gaily, for though her words were rebellious, her manner was gracious and winning. She was really grateful to him, though she would not say so in plain words.

"If we meet people, they will say all sorts of things," she said, as they turned their faces westward. "They will say I came out to meet you."

"I only wish it were true," he replied, candidly. "This is the only stroke of good luck I've had this day, and I'm going to enjoy it. We're going to have a change in the weather."

"Snow?" asked Eleanor, glancing up at the leaden sky.

"No, a thaw, and that before morning."

"It will be a God-send. Fancy, five weeks at home and not a day's hunting."

"Oh, you'll get plenty of it yet. Do you go much up to Annfield? I hear Claud is making a very smart place of it."

"I've never been yet, though they're always talking of it. It is Annfield, morning, noon, and night. I shall be glad when it is all done with."

"But you'll miss Claud awfully."

"Oh, I don't suppose he is going to live there unless he gets married."

"And there is no word of that?"

"Oh, I think not. One never gets rid of the idea that Claud is only an overgrown boy."

"He's four-and-twenty, isn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Allardyce looked at her amusedly. Her indifference to everything made her interesting.

"What are you laughing at, pray?"

"Well, to be quite frank, I am amused at you, Eleanor."

"I am glad I afford you some amusement. Anybody who creates a little diversion here is a public benefactor."

"Poor old File. You may one day look upon the Kingdom with a more friendly eye."

"The place is all right; it is even beautiful within certain limits," she said, critically regarding the grey expanse of the sea. "That is, the sea is always a redeeming feature."

"Then it is the people who have earned your displeasure?"

"They do not displease me; they simply bore me," she said, indifferently. "Bore me to death."

Allardyce did not seriously lay these discontented words to heart. He understood her very well; a great deal better than she at present understood herself. He knew that she was still smarting under her father's summary treatment of the Brabants; but he did not for a moment think that it was anything but a transient disappointment. She was so young—he anticipated for her a speedy revival of healthy interest in her surroundings. Meanwhile, he thought he could afford to wait. She was very friendly to him, and even encouraging up to a certain point. The very fact that she should so frankly speak of her dissatisfaction with everything indicated her confidence in him. He therefore walked by her side serenely, with hope in his breast, able to extract a certain amusement from the sharp sentences, which he believed came only from the lips.

"How many chickens has your mother got?" she asked, presently.

"It is early days yet to ask," he answered, imperturbably. "I do not presume to know anything about the glory of Castlebar, and I believe March is the soonest my mother ettles to begin to count. But I think she expects a good year."

"'Ettles'!" responded Eleanor. "It's a queer old word. Do you happen to know its derivation?"

"I don't; but if you want to know I'll make it my business to unearth it."

"That will be easy enough. You will only ask the old Bailie, who knows everything. I can ask him myself, thank you."

"All right."

"Do you know, you have no manners, Robert Allardyce, positively none!" was her next remark.

"Suppose you teach me a few," he said, turning his eyes, brimming with fun, to her lovely face.

"I have something else to do with my time," she replied, with dignity. "Is not this an interminable walk?"

"I don't find it so. We are not much more than half-way. Are you tired?"

He put the question with extreme solicitude, his deep tenderness betraying itself in both eyes and voice. She was woman enough to find something sweet in his love for her, only she would not show it.

"I am never tired," she replied, sharply.

"Perhaps you are tired of my talk," he suggested. "Shall I hold my tongue?"

"As you please. I have never been on an uglier, more tiresome road."

He relapsed into silence, and they walked on for five minutes without speech. He saw that she was fagged, and his heart yearned over her. He had in a marked degree that protecting chivalrous feeling towards women which is characteristic of the manly man, but he dared not show it to her.

"Suppose we rest a little at this gate," he suggested. "I can spread my overcoat on this boulder. Five minutes will make you as fresh as possible."

"Very well, thank you," she said, unexpectedly.

He took off his overcoat, carefully folded it, and she sat down.

"You will be cold," she said, looking up at him with a wonderfully softened look. "I am horribly rude to you, Bob, but I don't mean anything I say."

It was a perilous moment for him: and he could not resist it. The solitude of the place, their absolute loneli-

ness, and, above all, the subtle change in her voice and face, visible in the swift gathering shadows, banished his prudence to the wind.

He bent his head down to her—speaking quietly, yet with that repressed emotion and passion which communicated themselves to her.

"Eleanor, Eleanor, you know I love you! Will you be my wife?"





CHAPTER XIII.

"DEATH WILL COME SOON ENOUGH."

ELEANOR sprang up rather angrily, with flushing face.

"It is mean of you—mean, mean to catch me un-awares like this," she said, quickly. "I am going home."

She froze him with the passion of her indignation. He took up his coat meekly, and put it on.

"I beg your pardon," he said, curtly. "You may allow me to walk by your side, or behind you if you prefer it. I shall not offend again."

They strode on in ominous silence, with the breadth of the road between them. Presently from out the mirk shadows of the dyke emerged two evil-looking specimens of the genus tramp, eyeing them hungrily and even menacingly. Measuring, however, the lithe strength of Allardyce, they slouched on. Eleanor visibly cowered, and came close up to Allardyce's side.

"I am ashamed of my weakness, but I am afraid of these fellows," she said, rather confusedly.

"You are justified. I am only thankful you did not meet them alone."

Eleanor shivered, and stole a little wistful glance at him.

"You are very good, and I ought not to treat you so badly. But I don't care for you in that way. I wish I

could, but I don't, and can't you see how horribly miserable I am?"

"I can see you are not quite happy, but the future may give you your heart's desire," he said, a trifle stiffly.

It had cost her pride no small effort to acknowledge so much to him, and perhaps his manner disappointed her. But he, loving her as his own soul, could not in a moment cast aside his own frightful disappointment.

They walked on for other five minutes in a strained and awkward silence, both feeling relieved to see the lights of Kinghorn twinkling in the near distance.

"Your mother will think something has befallen you. Will you tell her what has detained you?"

"Certainly, but she won't worry. Occasionally I have missed the train and walked."

"You are very angry with me, Rob."

"Why should I be angry? I have no right to harbour any resentment against you."

"But you do. You are quite changed," she said, quickly. "You might know that there is nothing in the world would please me better than to—to do what you ask. It would please everybody else, too, I know, but I can't. You wouldn't want a wife who cared nothing for you—would you?"

"I would almost risk it with you, Eleanor," he said, passionately.

"But you don't know. I am horrid to live with, unless I get just what I want. Mamma will tell you that—she said it to me this very day, and I should never be content at Castlebar. I should nag you to death, and perhaps in the end run off with somebody else."

"It will be better not to risk that contingency," he said, quietly. "Pray, let us say no more about it—today, at least."

His quiet setting aside of the question rather nettled her. Having given him his deserts for his temerity, she felt that it might be interesting to discuss the matter a little. But it was a matter too deep and vital with

Robert Allardyce to admit of such discussion. He absolutely declined it, and they walked into Kinghorn High Street in a state of armed and silent neutrality.

"There's Claud with the dogcart, at the Post-Office door," he said, with unmistakable relief, which nettled her still more. "I am glad you are spared the last mile."

"So am I," she retorted—and they stepped across to the dogcart just as Claud came out of the Post-Office, putting the stamps on his father's letters.

"Hulloa, you two! where have you dropped from?" he said, with a comical significance which caused them both to flush.

"I met Mr. Allardyce, and he was kind enough to walk with me and protect me from the tramps," Eleanor replied, calmly. "You'd better put down the back seat, and he will go home to tea with us."

"No, he won't, thank you. I must go home," replied Allardyce, biting his lips.

He would have helped her to mount, but she gave a spring to the box-seat and took the reins.

"Hulloa! what's up!—been sparring, you two? It isn't worth it. Life's too short," said Claud, cheerfully. "Don't sulk, Rob, but get up like a man."

"Not to-day, thanks. I'm due at home. How's the improvements getting on? Perhaps when they're done we may see you at Castlebar."

"Tell your mother I'm coming up to get some tips about the chuckies," said Claud, with his huge, hearty laugh. "I'm going in for practical farming, and not a hen will be suffered about the place unless she pays her way."

Allardyce laughed, and with a brief good-afternoon, he strode away, not even offering to shake hands with Eleanor, who sat stiff and haughty on the box-seat with the ribbons in her hands.

"What's you and Rob been casting out about now?" asked Claud, as they drove off. "You're getting awfully bad-tempered, Nell—aren't you?"

"I suppose I must be, since everybody says so," she replied, coldly.

"But what's the good? It'll only ruin your digestion and shorten your life. Don't curb the mare like that, or she'll bolt, as sure as a gun."

"I know how to manage her as well as you," she retorted. "It's a pity, since I'm such a nuisance to everybody, that I can't be got rid of."

"Don't talk rot," said Claud, serenely. "I say, Annfield's going to turn out a tip-top little place. The mater was talking of a house-warming, and we could give a jolly big dance. Who could we have?"

"I'm sure I don't know. You have the pick of the countryside," she replied, indifferently.

Claud turned and looked at her attentively. It was now dark, but a big moon was up, and the light, momentarily growing clearer, shone full on her face.

"I say, Nell, everything seems to be going wrong with you. You're not the girl you used to be in the jolly old days."

"I am well reminded of the fact, if it is a fact," she snapped.

"I thought Allardyce looked awfully glum. Have you been jumping on him more than usual?"

"I don't know."

"He's awfully soft on you. Are you going to have him?"

"No, I'm not; that's what was the matter with him to-day," she said, finding a certain relief in letting it out.

"Oh! Poor beggar, I'm sorry for him; but aren't you making a big mistake? He's an awfully good chap, and it will please everybody."

"Except the person most concerned. Everybody has got to learn that Eleanor Kerr is not goods and chattels, to be disposed of anyhow."

"Oh, well, as you're on your high horse you can stop on it, and I'll shut up," said the candid Claud. "There are a good many different kinds of idiots in the world—

I'm one, and you're another, and upon my word I don't know which is worse."

"Oh, me!" said Eleanor, bitterly, and not pausing to consider her grammar. Thus severely sat upon, Claud, usually irrepressible, held his tongue, and in five minutes they were at home. She had succeeded in putting two naturally amiable persons entirely out of temper in one afternoon, and it may be supposed that she was quite satisfied with her day's work.

Claud, however, could not long remain in a depressed condition, and by dinner-time he was as lively as usual. Things were going well with him; and the future seemed very bright. The gentlemen at Haugh did not wear evening dress for the ordinary family dinner, a velvet jacket being the favourite attire. Instead of remaining with his father, or joining the ladies upstairs, Claud went out that evening without saying to anybody where he was going. They were so used to Eleanor's trying and uncourteous moods at Haugh that nobody had paid any particular attention to her that evening, and only the servants noticed that she ate very little dinner. Her father was just settling himself for a good smoke and a study of the current *Agriculturist*, when she came walking into the smoke-room and shut the door.

"Hulloa, Nell," he said, looking round in surprise, "what's up now?"

"Nothing much. Can I speak to you for a minute, father?"

"For twenty of 'em if you like," he said affably. "Sit down; you might make yourself useful in filling my pipe."

"I'm afraid I couldn't do it to please you."

"Oh, you'd learn. You can practise on me if you like; and then you'll be able to do it to please the husband when you get him."

"I'll let him do that little job for himself, if I let him smoke."

"Which you will, I hope. Never grudge a man his pipe, Nell; it raises the deil in him. But you'll soon

learn, as your mother has learned, that the pipe's her best friend. Well, what's wrong, now? Ta'en the gee again? I hope you're not to be ill-kindet, lassie."

"No, I'd be well enough if people would let me alone. I came to tell you something, papa. It will be better, I think, so that you will know not to speak about the subject any more."

"Ay, what is that?"

"I met Robert Allardyce this afternoon on the Kirk-caldy road, and he asked me to marry him."

Mr. Kerr balanced his pipe between his finger and thumb and waited eagerly, the matter being of some moment to him.

"Well, that's all; I refused him."

"Imphm! And what for did you refuse him? Ye'll never get a better man," said he, rather shortly.

"He's good enough; but I'm not going to marry him," replied Eleanor calmly. "And I thought it would be better to tell you it had happened, so that you may leave off speaking about him to me."

"But there's such a thing as changing a body's mind," said Kerr, suggestively. "A woman has been known to say 'no' when she means 'ay.'"

Eleanor's lip curled.

"I am not like that. So far as I am concerned the matter is at an end."

Kerr swung round in his chair and regarded his rebellious daughter attentively as she sat on the edge of the table indifferently toying with the bangles on her wrist. Perhaps rebellious is hardly the word to use, since there was no sign of active hostility about her. She was simply calm, indifferent, wholly determined, and self-possessed.

"Then, I want to know what the dickens you mean, and who you are, that you should turn up your nose at Allardyce of Castlebar?"

Eleanor lifted up her eyebrows in fine surprise.

"I am nobody," she replied. "That's what's the matter with me."

Kerr of Haugh was not conspicuous for any long-suffering quality, and a great deal less had been known to irritate him. But he honestly did not wish to have any hard words with his daughter, of whom he was really fond. He regarded her as he might have regarded a young unbroken colt or filly; and being skilled in the treatment of such, he decided to try gentle dealing first. To aid him in this he took two or three draws at his pipe, not looking at Eleanor as she sat dangling her legs indifferently, quite ready for the fray, or for anything to break the monotony, which was not in tune with her disturbed state of mind. At length he spoke in the most conciliatory tone he could command, though it had a kind of imperative ring in it.

"Now, look here, Eleanor, there's no use kicking up such perpetual dust here. I don't know what's got into you, whether it's the French folk or no; but you're giving your mother and me a sight too much trouble, and it's got to be done with. Do you hear?"

"I hear," she answered, calmly.

"I'm not wanting any arguments or ill words with you, Eleanor, though ye deserve them. Ye are too well off, and don't know it—that's what's the matter with you, if you like. Now, do you remember what I said to you once before in this room?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, it will bear saying again. While ye are at Haugh ye'll be civil to me and helpful to your mother, which ye are not the now, but only a heartbreak. And for marrying, I'm not hurrying you, but there's but the two ye can choose from—the man ye said 'no' till the day, and Willie Heron. Ye ken which will keep ye best at heck and manger."

"How vulgar you are, papa," she said, quietly. "You forget you are not speaking of your cattle."

"Well, the difference is not great," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "A little higher up the scale we are. Isn't that what they're telling us nowadays? But that

doesn't matter. I'm not wanting you out of Haugh, Eleanor; but neither am I to be bothered with this kind of ongoing, and you are worrying your mother into her grave."

"Well, I can't live here. Let me go away again to travel, papa," she said, eagerly. "Let me go back to Madame Fourmin for another year."

Kerr shook his head.

"That's been your undoing, and there's been enough spent on you. Can't you settle down like other lassies to your piano-playing an' your needle, with a cookie-shine or a dance now and again to enliven you. Then there's the hunting. We'll have a fine season yet. I'll let ye into Ayrshire, if ye like, to the Carmichaels', for a month."

There was a degree of real kindness and consideration in all this, though it was roughly expressed, but it made no impression on Eleanor. The girl's nature was for the time being warped and twisted, and impervious to any softer influences.

"I hate the Carmichaels, and where is the weather for hunting? Anyhow, that Dick Carmichael would give anybody cold shivers," she said, petulantly.

Kerr, now really angered, rose and pointed to the door.

"Go to your bed, my woman, and bide in it or ye get a better temper. I ken very well what would do ye good, an' I'm sore tempted to gie ye it mysel' in spite o' your eighteen years."

"I wish I'd never been born," she said, sullenly, as she slid off the table and turned away.

Then Kerr, whose forbearance had been marvellous for him, swore at her and put her to the door.

She went up the stairs with her head in the air and the colour high in her cheeks, and when she saw her mother at the drawing-room door—disturbed by the banging of the smoke-room door—she gave a little laugh, which her mother did not like to hear.

"Eleanor, dear," she said, gently, and with a visible

trembling, "what have you been saying to your father? How often have I warned you not to anger him? He is very passionate, and sometimes forgets himself."

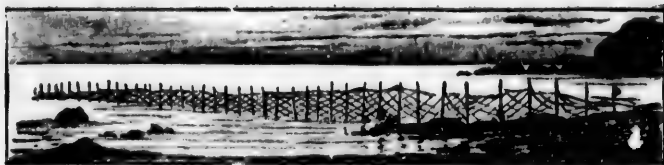
"Very often—rather often—mamma," she said, significantly. "We have only had a little difference. I dare say it will not be the last. Men like papa are a perfect nuisance in a civilised country where women are supposed to have some rights."

"I must forbid you to speak so of your father," said Mrs. Kerr, quickly. "Eleanor, what has come to you? You are not the daughter I used to love. Oh! my dear, you will regret all this; bitterly deplore the way you are vexing your father's heart and mine."

"Do you suppose I enjoy feeling like this?" asked Eleanor, rebelliously. "It is because everything I wish is denied me, and I can find nothing in life worth living for. I wish I were dead."

"Death will come soon enough, my daughter," said Alison Kerr, with a touch of quiet solemnity. "Maybe before you are ready for it."





CHAPTER XIV.

"WELL, I AM QUITE WILLING."

UNDISTURBED by any discontent or rebellious kicking against his lot, Claud went whistling across the fields in the direction of the village. It was a fine starry night, bitterly cold, but delightful for a brisk walk, which Claud enjoyed to the full. He was in the best of health and spirits, both physical and mental qualities being fully absorbed by his new estate. He lit a cigar by and by, and his face took on a more sober look. It was no aimless stroll he was taking; he had a definite purpose in view. There was one light in the low window of the old Manse when he came within sight of it, and that glow seemed to warm his heart. As he walked up the little garden path he saw only one shadow on the blind—a woman's—bending over the table; and he felt content; it was the figure of the woman he had come to see.

Mary herself, as he expected, opened the door in answer to his knock.

She did not look at all embarrassed, but truly glad to see him, and said so.

"I am all alone, Claud; mother has gone to bed and is asleep. But if you like you can come in and wait till Willie comes; he will be here about nine."

"Where is he?"

"At Edinburgh. This is the press visit day at the Academy—he has got three out of his five hung, and well, too; and mine has got a very decent place. Mr. Aitken says it's a place of honour."

"That's good; you deserve it," said Claud, heartily, though he knew very little about art, nothing at all of the heartburnings and disappointments over the acceptance and hanging of pictures year by year.

"And you're all alone; how awfully slow for you," he said, as he walked into the little parlour. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Oh no, so long as Wallace lies here," she said, stooping to pat the retriever lying on the rug.

"You have rather a poor fire. I must send you down a cartload of logs, same as we have been burning at Annfield to heat and dry the house. They make a tip-top fire—regular Yule-tide business."

Mary gave the embers one judicious poke and laid on a small piece of coal. She had only enough left to make the fire in the morning; a fact she was extremely anxious, as usual, to keep hidden. Their poverty was sore upon her, and it was a satisfaction to her to think, nay, to know, that nobody suspected them of being half so poor as they were. But Claud bent forward and tried to make some improvement on the fire, recklessly piling on the precious fuel, till Mary could scarcely hold her tongue; but she did. The room was not warm. The house, being old and damp, would have required for its comfort such firing as the Herons never dreamed of. Even the lamp burning clearly and steadily seemed to do but little towards taking the chill off the atmosphere.

"Ay, and Will's at Edinburgh, is he? I haven't seen him for ages—been so awfully busy at Annfield, never a minute to spare. I tell you it's going to turn out a tip-top place."

He stretched out his long legs and turned his ruddy face full on Mary, and she looked across at him pleasantly, thinking what a picture of strong young manhood he made—the embodiment of health and strength and

general prosperity. She could not help wondering how he would look and feel in their narrow circumstances, which forbade at any time a full meal such as the souls of men are supposed to rejoice in.

"I hear it's going to be very grand. Everybody is talking of Annfield and nothing but Annfield. Is it true you are going to give a dance as a house-warming?"

"I want to, and so does mother. Can you tell me, Mary, what's wrong with our Eleanor?" he said, suddenly.

"Indeed I can't," replied Mary, truthfully, and not evincing any surprise.

"She's as crabbed as an old pear-tree, and as thrawn as the very deil. Did you see the French folks when they were at Haugh?"

"Only in church."

"You don't know, then, what there was between Eleanor and the man?"

Mary shook her head.

"I thought maybe she'd tell you; but now I come to think of it, you've been precious little up at Haugh since Christmas."

"I've been twice, and you were at Annfield both times."

"Well, if you'd let a fellow know when you're likely to be. But about Eleanor. I'll tell you something, Mary, if you don't speak of it. Not that it's any tremendous secret, only Allardyce wouldn't like it, I dare say; no chap would. He asked Eleanor to marry him to-day, and she refused him."

Mary gave a little shiver, then all the hot blood rushed to her face. She felt as if she were choking, but was obliged to sit still, there being no way of escape from her visitor just then. Claud observed her confusion, but, curiously enough, failed to read it aright.

"I'm awfully sorry about it, for, of course, it was the very match for her. Don't you think Rob a jolly good fellow?"

"Yes, oh yes," Mary answered, and her voice sounded faint and cold in her own ears.

"As for the governor, he's sure to raise Cain about it," said the candid and cheerful Claud. "He's dead set on it. He has always said there's but two men for Eleanor—Allardyce and your Willie."

"Oh, that is out of the question," said Mary, quickly, and beginning to recover herself. "Eleanor must marry a rich man."

"Well, but Willie is likely to be rich some day; anyhow he's got the right side of the governor, and he could have Eleanor for the asking to-morrow, so far as he is concerned."

"Willie would never aim so high."

"I thought he was rather fond of Nell once," said Claud, disappointedly; "and now that she has bowled over Allardyce, I thought he'd maybe go in and win."

"He won't attempt it so long as he is so poor as he is," said Mary, quietly. "It seems a pity sometimes that money should be so unequally divided."

"That's an old cry," said Claud, meditatively, and keeping his eye on the fire, which showed distinct signs of revival, only he did not observe it. "Yes, Annfield's going to lick into a jolly nice place. When are you coming up to see it?"

"Oh, one day. I promised Mrs. Kerr to go with her one day when she is driving."

"That's all right. I hope you'll be pleased with it."

Mary gave a little laugh.

"There can be no question about that. Besides, what would it matter though I was ever so much displeased?"

She asked the question quite straightly and innocently, not having the smallest idea of the errand upon which Claud Kerr had deliberately come. There was not an atom of coquetry in her nature, and very little of that natural playfulness which in happier circumstances might have lightened her somewhat grave character. Life had always been too real and hard for

Mary Heron ; her heart had been crushed by the sordid bitterness of her destiny.

"It matters a good deal," said Claud, soberly, and then an odd silence fell upon them both. But Mary, deftly darning a pair of worn socks, did not appear to be greatly embarrassed by it ; her thoughts, indeed, were elsewhere. Had poor Claud known what was their burden, he would have looked less contented. But he was not disturbed thereby, only casting about in his mind for words most fitting in which to frame the question he had at heart.

As it happened, Mary herself, by her next question, put the very words into his mouth.

"Are you going to live up there by yourself?"

"I shall have to, I suppose, unless somebody takes pity on me," he said, with a huge breath of relief. "That's what I've come about."

"What?" asked Mary, even yet wholly at sea.

"Why, to ask you to come up."

"Well, I am coming some day with your mother. Didn't I say so?"

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of coming. Hang it all, I don't know how to put it. Won't you help a fellow out, Mary? I want you at Annfield always—that's what I'm driving at."

The old sock fell from the girl's astonished fingers, and she looked at him in bewilderment. There was no doubt about his sincerity ; it was written on his face. Just then Wallace gave a growl, and shook himself vigorously, then the gate swung, and Willie came into the house. Mary, thankful for the interruption, which gave her a respite, ran out to meet her brother.

"Claud Kerr is here, Willie," she said, quickly. "Just go in ; I must see to mother. I haven't been up for an hour or more."

"All right," said Willie, cheerfully, and stalked into his sitting-room, suspecting nothing.

"Hulloa! old chappie," he said, and the two men shook hands cordially.

They had always been the best of friends, though as different in appearance and everything else as could well be imagined. Willie Heron was tall and slim and slender, with a thin, pale, earnest face, a pair of liquid, melancholy eyes, and a high white brow, on which his hair lay thickly. He wore it long, not being free of the slight affectations common to his craft. He looked like an artist, with his turnover collar and broad necktie tied in a negligent bow, and there was genius written on his brow. It was a fine, thoughtful, but rather sad face, though to-night brighter than usual, having had some meed of encouragement and good luck across the water.

"I've got two sold, Claud, at the private view," he said, with a kind of quiet joy. "I think the tide's going to turn at last."

"I hope so, I'm sure," said Claud, looking at him with a kind of vague wonder that the sale of two pictures should be of such moment to any man. He had never known what it was to be without pocket-money since he wore petticoats. Plenty was the watchword written, though invisible, above the gates of Haugh. They fell into a very friendly, brotherly talk, but Mary did not come down. Her heart was breaking as she stole upstairs to her mother's room, and entered it softly. She was still asleep, her wan, pale face lying serenely on her pillow, her hand with its thin wedding-ring lying outside the coverlet. Mary knelt down and laid her cheek on it, and began to cry softly, with her face hidden. Her heart was sore, sore almost to breaking point. She did not know till now, when her hope was shattered, how she had been set upon Robert Allardyce. In that brief, and to her terrible, moment downstairs, her own heart had been revealed to her, and she realised that, because she loved the man as her own soul, a blackness greater than any she had yet experienced had overtaken her life. As she knelt there in the chill, almost desolate room where she

had spent many a trying hour, she wished that death might come to her. She had bravely borne poverty, care, anxiety of the most miserable kind, hiding it from the world, and cheerfully making the best of every trifling good each day might bring, and this was the end. Her fortitude was gone, and she knelt there a beaten and stricken woman, whose love, cherished in her heart since her very childhood, was thus, as it were, thrown back to her, an unwelcome gift. Nobody wanted her in the whole wide world; even her own mother in her querulous moments had made light of her unselfish service. Ay, the lights of life were burning very low for Mary Heron. She ceased her weeping by and by, but remained upon her knees, resting her head wearily, and wondering at her mother's sound sleep. She could even smile a little indulgent smile by and by, for it was one of Mrs. Heron's grievances that "she never closed an eye," to use her own expression; whereas in truth she slept most nights more soundly than Mary, who had so much to worry her, and was often too tired to sleep. Downstairs the two men still talked comfortably together, the sound of their voices ascending pleasantly to the room above; once they laughed aloud, and Mary rose to her feet. The blind was not yet drawn at the window, for no windows overlooked the old Manse, and few passed up the quiet lane after dark. It was a lovely night, the stars dazzling in their number and brilliance. Mary fancied she could see the sea—certainly the familiar lights on Inchkeith and Fiddra—and the May Island gleamed with cheerful steadiness out upon the hidden waste of waters. A curious and sudden thought came to Mary as she stood there looking out and listening to the hum of the voices downstairs—the thought of how much she could do for others were she to accept Claud Kerr's offer and become mistress of Annfield. It would mean a sudden and complete uplifting from all the miserable drudgery of her life, an introduction to its sunnier side. She turned her head and looked at her mother's face lying on the

pillow ; it was white and thin, and lined with the lines care and privation had brought. Claud Kerr was rich—and generous too. Her heart beat, her face flushed a little, and thoughts chased each other wildly through her brain.

Presently her brother came to the foot of the stairs and called her gently.

"Claud is going, Mary. Can you come down?"

"Directly. Ask him to wait one moment."

She sponged her face, gave her hair a hasty smooth, and wrapped a pink woollen shawl around her head and shoulders. The face looking out from the becoming wrap was beautiful, with its unusual flush of colour, its bright eyes.

They were both in the little hall when she appeared on the stairs, Claud with his hat in his hand.

Willie looked at her in astonishment.

"Hulloa, Tib," he said, using an old pet name, "what's up?"

"I'll go out to the gate with Claud, Willie," she said, steadily. "No, don't come."

Willie opened the door humbly and shook hands with Claud, then he shut it on them both, and went back to the sitting-room like a man in a dream. They walked out to the gate in silence, then Claud paused and looked at her with all the eagerness that was natural, her action being full of hope.

"Well, Mary," he said, falteringly for him, "what is it to be?"

She folded her hands on the gate post, and looked up at him steadily with a kind of sad, wistful look.

"You were asking me to be your wife, weren't you, Claud?"

"I was."

"Well, I am quite willing, and I thank you very much."

It was an odd speech ; and Claud looked at her just a moment, as if not quite taking it in.

She forestalled his speech.

"WELL, I AM QUITE WILLING."

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"You have surprised me very much, for I didn't expect it, and, of course, I haven't had time to get used to it. But I'll do my best to be a good wife to you, and to make you happy."

"That'll do for me, Mary darling," he answered with all a lover's fervour. "You know jolly well you can do just as you like with me, and make of me what you will."





CHAPTER XV.

"MISS ELEANOR'S AWAY."

MRS. ALLARDYCE made an afternoon call at Haugh next day ; but was informed that Mrs. Kerr had been up at Annfield all day. She was talking to the housemaid on the step when Eleanor came downstairs.

"Oh, you are at home, Eleanor?" she said, bluntly. "I wanted your mother, but I'll come in if ye bid me. It's ower soon yet to go to the station for Rob."

"You can come in, of course ; it is quite a needless question. Bring tea to the dining-room, Katie. We have no fire in the drawing-room, as mother did not expect to be home till dinner-time, and then she will be so tired she will want to go to bed directly after."

Eleanor's manner was exceedingly ungracious, but it did not disturb Mrs. Allardyce in the least. She looked the girl all over as she followed her into the dining-room, and though she did not love her, she did not withhold a meed of admiration for her winsome beauty. But there was too much pride in that high carriage, and the woman whose half-a-century's experience of life had taught her much wisdom felt a moment's sadness as she thought of the shocks such pride must inevitably sustain through the stress of years.

"I'm not for tea, thank you," she said, prosaically.

"I'm not one of those folk that tea, tea for ever in ilka hoose they enter."

"Very well, if you won't have it, I think I will. Isn't it bitterly cold still? Even in the house we feel it."

Eleanor did not speak very freely, not feeling at her ease before the sharp eyes of Robert Allardyce's mother. There was something else conducing to her uneasiness, a dread lest she should stay so long that a certain plan of Eleanor's should fall through.

"Annfield's gettin' on. Robert tells me he took a walk up by it yesterday afternoon. Claud seems fine pleased wi' his new hame."

"So weil he may be; it has cost a pretty penny," said Eleanor. "Of course you have heard the news."

"What news?"

"That Mary Heron is to be mistress of Annfield."

Mrs. Allardyce gave a great start.

"Deed, I have not. Is that to be? When was it settled?"

"Only last night, and there is general rejoicing. Mother is quite ridiculously pleased, and Claud feels that he has done his duty by his family."

"Mary Heron mistress of Annfield!" repeated Mrs. Allardyce, her tone of the deepest disappointment, for the words had caused a pet castle of her own to topple in ruins at her feet. "Surely it is a great surprise to a'budy."

"Well, it was to me, for I really didn't think she cared about him. But one never knows what to make of quiet girls like Mary Heron."

"I hope the lassie has not been tempted by siller an' gear," said Mrs. Allardyce. "They canna buy peace o' mind."

"No, but they help. I shouldn't wonder if Annfield were the bait; of course everybody knows the Herons are frightfully hard up."

She spoke flippantly and with a certain sarcasm. The subject did not greatly interest her—she had started it for the purpose of diverting the visitor's attention

from her. On ordinary occasions that would not have concerned her either ; but that day she was particularly anxious that Mrs. Allardyce should put no home questions.

"Well, lass, ye have gien my lad his right-about face, he tells me," said Mrs. Allardyce, presently, too sore in her mind to observe that reticence which she knew would be more dignified. "I hope you will be able to do better for yourself—but I doubt it."

Eleanor bit her lip, flushing redly.

"I thought you would be very glad, Mrs. Allardyce. You don't like me very much."

This was unexpected and to the point. It was Mrs. Allardyce's turn to blush.

"We are too like in the temper to be very sib ; but, at the same time, I am not a born eediet, Eleanor Kerr, and if ye became Mistress Rob I would do my duty, and stand by ye to the very last."

It was the simple truth she spoke, and Eleanor knew it. Whatever the faults of the present mistress of Castlebar, she would remain absolutely loyal in every relation of her life.

"I suppose your 'no' is final, Eleanor?" she said, presently. "I'm no without my ain pride, which can match the pride o' ony Kerr amang ye—but my heart is sair for my lad."

The pathos of her speech, which cost her dear, touched the girl's heart, and she turned to her impulsively.

"Mrs. Allardyce, I would give anything, anything," she repeated, passionately, "to be able to mar-y your son—but I can't; I don't care for him. I like him. I admire him. I know he is a good son, and would make any woman happy—but I can't marry him."

It was a great deal for one so reserved to say, and Mrs. Allardyce's heart warmed to her as it had never yet done.

"Well, maybe time will help. I'll say only this—If ever ye come to Castlebar, Eleanor, ye'll get a kind welcome frae me ; till then I can wait."

She saw a tear in the girl's eye, and her own was not dry. Katie brought in the tea-tray then, and relieved the tension of the moment. Their talk drifted into the commonplace gossip of the countryside, so interesting to Mrs. Allardyce that she was in danger of missing her son's train. Eleanor, however, reminded her in good time, and when she was gone breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Allardyce thought much of Eleanor as she drove quickly to the station, and her thoughts were all kindly, more kindly than they had been for many a day. She seemed to have obtained an unexpected glimpse into the girl's heart, and to have seen there more feeling and sincerity than she had ever given her credit for. She not only forgave her rejection of Robert, but was prepared to defend the girl for having the courage of her own convictions; thus showing the generous impulsiveness of her nature. Directly she had closed the door on her visitor, Eleanor rang for the housemaid.

"Do you know whether papa left any orders for a trap to drive me to Kirkcaldy, Katie?" she asked, and there was a flush in her cheeks—a curious high nervous ring in her voice.

"No, Miss Kerr. I have not heard anything about it. Shall I ask?"

"Yes, do. They have James and the wagonette at Annfield; but if papa left no orders, Andrew Kidd and the gig will do, or even the phaeton. There isn't much luggage."

"Are you going from home, Miss Kerr?" inquired the girl, in surprise, hearing of it now for the first time.

"Yes—up north for a few days. My things are all ready. Just run down to the stable and see what you can do."

Katie was rather surprised, but thought nothing strange about it, only, as a rule, the ladies of Haugh did not travel without more ado. Eleanor, with the hot flush still high on her cheeks, ran up to her own rooms. A small trunk stood packed on the floor, and her dressing-bag, not yet closed, on a chair. Her smart tweed

jacket and travelling cloak and hat lay ready on the bed. Everything seemed ready for departure; one thing only she desired to do, and that was to write a few lines to her mother. She sat down at her writing-table and essayed them, but the task was difficult. Before she had finished, Katie came knocking at the door.

"Andrew Kidd has had no orders, Miss Eleanor, but he's getting the little dogcart and Prince ready—will that do?"

"Very well."

"Is he to hurry, Miss? What train is he to catch?"

"Somewhere between five and six. He'll do in a quarter of an hour, tell him. Get Christian to help you down with this box."

"Is there anything else I can do, Miss Eleanor?"

"No, thank you."

"Please, Miss, are you to be long away?" she inquired, still lingering, feeling that there was something odd in the whole proceedings, yet assured by the perfect calmness and matter-of-fact demeanour displayed by her young mistress.

"I don't know. Don't stand there talking, Katie, when you have to tell Andrew Kidd and get Christian to tie the box. I want a rope round it. They knock them about so."

Katie quickly withdrew, and did as she was bid. Andrew Kidd was the young groom at Haugh—a pleasant, open-faced lad, completely under the stern control of James Wilson, who had been half a century at Haugh, and kept the most of the servants, male and female, in their place. He was greatly pleased to have this chance of driving Miss Eleanor into Kirkcaldy, and bore his pleasure in his round, red, beaming face. Eleanor had not much to say to him or to anybody. She was quite pale as she sprang up beside him, and her eyes, behind her thick veil, were suspiciously wet. Andrew Kidd was able to say afterwards that she never looked up or opened her mouth the whole way to Kirkcaldy. Prince a four-year old colt, was inclined to restiveness, and could

not be left a moment at the station. Andrew Kidd had therefore no opportunity of observing anything concerning the journey his young lady was about to take. A porter took off the luggage. Eleanor gave Andrew half-a-crown, and with a hasty nod disappeared into the station. Before he had reached Seafeld on the way home an Edinburgh express dashed along the railway lines, and Eleanor sat in one of the first-class carriages alone. When she arrived at Waverley Station she found she could get no further on her southward journey till ten o'clock unless she took a train to Carlisle.

As she was leaving home surreptitiously, in plain words running away, it was necessary for her to exercise some discretion and wariness in her planning; so, after a moment's hesitation, she took her ticket to Carlisle, rightly thinking that there she would be beyond suspicion or pursuit.

It was nearly seven o'clock before the party returned from Annfield, Mrs. Kerr dead tired with her day's work of arranging furniture and planning other things, but very happy at heart. The story Claud had brought her on his return from the old Manse had made a new woman of her, entirely relieving her of her anxiety concerning him. She knew what Mary Heron was—strong, reliant, sensible, and withal sweet, abounding in every solid quality Claud lacked. She was the very wife for him. She had uplifted her heart many times that day in gratitude to God for His mercy to her and hers. And she came home to a new sorrow, one which would lie chill upon hearth and home for many a day.

"Well, Katie, here we are," she said, blithely, as the willing girl threw open the door. "Is cookie cross, and Miss Eleanor out of all sorts for her dinner? Tell them they shall have a shine at Annfield for their patience. It's a bonnie, bonnie place."

Katie stood aghast, and her sonsy face wore its most bewildered look.

"Miss Eleanor's away, ma'am, at half-past four, to

Kirkcaldy, Andrew Kidd driving her in the dogcart with Prince."

"Isn't she back yet? Andrew Kidd ought not to have taken Prince out, and yet Eleanor should be able to manage him. Half-past four, nearly three hours ago. Surely nothing will have happened then?"

"Oh, ma'am, Andrew Kidd's back ever so long ago. Miss Eleanor's away from home with luggage. She said she was going up north for a few days, and she seemed surprised that the master had left no orders about how she was to be taken to the station."

"I never heard tell of it, Katie, till this moment," said Mrs. Kerr, faintly; something seemed to be gripping her heart.

"Oh, there's a note, ma'am; Miss Eleanor said she had forgotten to tell you something, and would write it. I'll bring it."

She flew upstairs; and Mrs. Kerr sank on an old settle all trembling, feeling that something terrible had happened. Just then the men came in from the stable, bringing a whiff of the keen cold air with them.

"That's a queer place to take a rest, mistress," said Mr. Kerr, in surprise.

"I had to sit down, Alec. I've got a fright. Did you know anything about Eleanor going away to-day? Katie says you knew."

"Away where?" inquired Kerr, and Claud shut the door and stood looking in amazement too.

"She's gone, Katie says. Andrew Kidd took her to Kirkcaldy with luggage. Here she is with the note."

Katie gave it to her mistress, and then, with a delicacy that became her, quickly withdrew. With trembling fingers Mrs. Kerr broke open the envelope. Eleanor's farewell did not take long to read, though it had taken a good many minutes to write.

"DEAR MOTHER,—I am leaving home because I am too miserable to stay any longer. I make everybody else miserable, too, so it is better for me to go. I will

write soon. Try not to worry about me, and tell papa not to be angry with everybody because I have gone away. I have plenty of money, nearly sixty pounds; I did not spend any of the money papa sent to Paris, and I have some in the bank at Edinburgh. I tell you this because I know it would worry you to think I had none. I won't do anything to vex you or hurt myself. I can take care of myself. Forget all about me, dearest mother; I have not been a good daughter, and never would be. There is something wrong in my nature, a twist I can't keep straight, so it is better to go away.—
Your affectionate
"ELEANOR."

Alexander Kerr read this precious missive over his wife's shoulder, and his face was a sight to see. All the hot blood of the Kerrs was up, but his passion of wrath was arrested by the anguish on his wife's pale face. The paper fluttered from her nerveless fingers, and she sank back, gave a faint sigh, and consciousness, for the time being, slipped away.





CHAPTER XVI.

"LET ME IMPORE YOU TO GO BACK."

PARIS being impossible to the Brabants for the time being, by reason of undischarged accounts in the Avenue D'Ena and elsewhere, that impecunious but resourceful family had taken apartments in London in a quiet street off the Edgeware Road. From this new address Madame had written to Eleanor, giving her a roseate account of Adrian's success with a new play, which Rickman intended to produce later on in the season, when everybody should be in town. It was for Adrian's sake that she made the sacrifice to leave the adorable Paris and endure the fogs of London at the very worst season of the year, and she added the plaintive hope that her maternal unselfishness might meet with some adequate return. About Louis she was discreetly reserved, simply saying he was a changed man since disappointed hope had darkened the horizon of his life. It was the receipt of this letter which decided Eleanor upon the step she had contemplated since the abrupt departure of the Brabants from Haugh. She had surrounded these false and shallow people with a halo of romance, and she imagined that to cast in her lot with them was to do a noble deed. That she was as ignorant as a baby of the world's ways was proved by the fact

that no qualm visited her as she sped on her way to London. She threw herself upon their tender mercies trustfully, though she scornfully doubted the honest love and protecting care of her own parents. Truly, as she herself said, there was a twist in her nature somewhere to account for this strange anomaly.

Having slept the night at Carlisle, she went on by the morning train, arriving at Euston shortly after four in the afternoon, to find the city enveloped in one of the worst fogs of the season. Her hansom had to crawl to its destination, and she was cold, hungry, and tired, and conscious of a strange sinking of heart. But this she tried to banish, reproving herself for thus mistrusting her friends. The house in Minton Street was a boarding-house frequented by French people, though kept by an Englishwoman. A tawdry servant, beholding in the stranger only a new arrival, signifying more work to her, hastily called her mistress and withdrew to her own dismal domain. The landlady came forward smiling and officious, surprised at the distinguished air of the young lady who stood within the door directing the cabman to bring up her luggage.

"Is Madame Brabant at home?" she inquired.

"Not at present, but she will be in soon. You are not expected, I think, Miss?" she said, civilly, but less effusively, for she had as yet received nothing but promises from Madame Brabant. "At least Madame said nothing to me about your coming."

"I am not expected; but I can wait in her rooms till she comes in. What is this man's fare?"

"Three shillin', Miss, in a fog like this," put in the individual in question, "an' not a penny less, so help me bob."

Eleanor handed him a crown piece, which changed his demeanour to one of grateful humility, and duly impressed the waiting landlady, who immediately showed her upstairs without further ado. The sitting-room was not distinguished from others of its class—being commonplace, well-worn, and dingy. It smelled

of stale cigar smoke, which caught Eleanor's breath as she entered. The landlady broke up the fire and turned on the gas.

"Madame will be in for tea very soon, but I can send you some now if you like, Miss."

"No, thank you, I'll wait," she said, and sat down at the table, whereon lay the *Times* and several French papers.

When the door closed upon her Eleanor took off her gloves absently, looking critically round the room, which presented a wide contrast to the spacious, wholesome, and beautiful home she had left. She wondered how Madame, who affected fastidiousness in the most minor details of life, could endure existence under such conditions, and she conceived that times must be harder than they had yet been with her friends. During the half hour she waited her enthusiasm had time to cool, and the first misgiving she had experienced began to press rather heavily upon her. Shortly after five Madame Brabant returned from her shopping expedition in Westbourne Grove. She had let herself in with her own latchkey, and was therefore totally unprepared for the apparition which greeted her in the sitting-room. She dropped her many parcels on the floor, and held up her hands.

"Mon Dieu! what are you doing here?" she cried, thrown off her guard; but immediately recovering herself, she changed her expression of blank consternation for one of effusive welcome.

"My child, my dear child, this is indeed a joy too great—what has happened?" she said, seizing her two hands and kissing her with much affection.

It was a question difficult to answer, as nothing had happened, and somehow the foolishness of her expedition now stood out before Eleanor in all its bareness. She felt that she had made an idiot of herself by thrusting herself upon these people, who were so poor, and who probably didn't want her. Madame's expression at first sight of her remained disagreeably in her mind.

"Nothing particular has happened, Madame," she replied, rather dismally. "Only I could not endure life at Haugh any longer, so I have come to you."

"Well, my child, your welcome is as warm as ever, though you find us in these miserable circumstances. Faugh! Fate is more unkind than ever. Louis has just taken a little run to Paris to see whether matters are irredeemably bad. Adrian works like a galley slave, and will achieve fame and fortune one day, perhaps after I am dead. Meanwhile I endure life here, and frequent the cheap shops to make what appearance I can before the world."

It was a clever explanation, which was not without its usual effect on Eleanor, who instantly beheld in the dingy surroundings which had so amazed and depressed her something touching and romantic.

"Dear Madame," she said, impulsively, "it grieves me to find you like this. I shall help you all I can."

"We shall see after what is to be done, meanwhile we must have something to eat. Adrian dines at a restaurant, but will be home to us presently; it is even possible that Louis may return to-night. Come, then, and lay off your travelling garb."

"It is not worth while, Madame. You have so little room here. I can go to an hotel. I have plenty of money."

"I am glad to hear that, my child. Money is a scarcer commodity than ever with the poor Brabants. But there is no need for you to go to an hotel. There are plenty of rooms in this house, and you can eat with us, if our humble fare and poor salon can be endured after your stately home."

"It is not that, Madame," said Eleanor, faintly flushing. "But perhaps it would be hardly proper for me to live here with you."

"But why? Is it less proper than in these sweet old days on the Riviera and at the Savoy? If we are happy it is no one's business, and the boys will be charmed."

Even while Madame was speaking thus volubly and

affably her mind was busy with a thousand schemes. The girl might be useful to them. She must be detained at all hazards ; at least, until she had taken counsel with Louis. But she had Adrian to reckon with. He returned home before they had finished tea, and was so transfixed by the sight of Eleanor Kerr sitting at his mother's table that he could not speak. She appeared a little shy and embarrassed, and the conviction grew upon her that she had acted too hastily, and had made a great mistake. She saw it in his face and in his grave demeanour, though he gave her greeting hearty enough. He remained singularly silent during the meal, only putting in a word now and again. When they had finished, Eleanor withdrew for a moment, and then Adrian turned to his mother with some haste and passion.

"She cannot remain here," he said, very hotly for him, who was usually so mild. "You know that she cannot. You will not seek to keep her?"

"My dear, she has thrust herself upon us, and she can stay if she is so minded until I discern whether she is likely to be useful to us," she replied, serenely.

"After what has happened, it would not be right nor decent," he said, more hotly still. "She is evidently as ignorant as a child of conventionalities. She proved it by coming here. It would be base to take advantage of that ignorance. She must be sent home."

"My dear Adrian," said his mother, bluntly, "will you have the supreme goodness to shut up?"

"No, I will not. Some one must speak. She shall be sent home, even if I have to take her myself."

"Well, you must at least wait till to-morrow," she said, imperturbably, though evidently much irritated. "And you will at least have the civility to inquire whether she is willing to go home or would accept your escort."

Eleanor returned at the moment, and Adrian had no opportunity to say more. Madame was naturally extremely desirous that Adrian and Eleanor should not be

left *tête-à-tête*, but it happened that a troublesome tradesman, who would not be put off by the landlady's assurances that Madame was not at home, necessitated her leaving the room for a little space of time. Then Adrian turned eagerly to Eleanor, who sat rather dejectedly by the fire, her eyes somewhat troubled.

"My dear sister—I may call you so, since you understand how entirely I am devoted to your interest," he began, in the slightly formal manner which characterised their mode of speech, "let me ask you, in the name of Heaven, what induced you to leave your comfortable home to come here?"

He spoke so gravely and with such emphasis that Eleanor looked at him for a moment in startled silence. He looked thinner and paler than when she had last seen him fresh from the beneficent Mediterranean breeze, and his expressive eyes had an anxious look in them. Her heart warmed to him; she instinctively felt that in Adrian, at least, she possessed one true friend.

"I—I do not know why I have come. I only know I could no longer suffer existence at home, and I had no friends to whom I could come except your mother."

"But you do not understand. You are young, you are beautiful, you cannot be bound to the sordid details of this miserable life. We cannot get bread for our own mother. How, then, can we give to you such things as are yours by right?"

He spoke with an almost brutal frankness, so anxious was he to show Eleanor the situation in its true light, and induce her to lose no time in returning home.

"I do not want your charity," she said, with that proud, upward glance which only filled him with a great sad pity. "I have money, and when it is spent, I can work."

He smiled ironically, and gave his hand a deprecating wave.

"Child, you speak of what you know not. This is a great city, and there are millions upon millions of money in it, enough and to spare for every man, woman and

child within its bounds; but it is in the hands of the few, and the great bulk of the people are oppressed with the misery of living. Tell me what chance do you think a young girl like you has to earn a living in such a place?"

"I can do many things, some of them well, I have been told; and I have no pride, only enough to show them that I can live my life independently," she said, with the colour rising high in her cheek.

"My dear, the heart of the true woman is happy and at peace only in that dependence which love finds passing sweet. You know me of old. I would lay down my life to serve you, and my first service to you would be to send you home."

"I will not go," said Eleanor, rebelliously. "I want to see something of life. That narrow place was crushing the soul out of me."

Adrian Brabant moved the papers on the table with a nervous hand. He longed to speak more plainly, to tell her it was neither fitting nor safe for her to dwell under their roof, subject to the scheming of his mother and brother. It was a delicate matter to handle, and his reticence was aided by a natural reluctance to decry his own people.

"I cannot understand what tempted you to leave such a beautiful home," he repeated, helplessly. "I implore you to go back."

"No," she retorted. "I have taken my life in my own hands. I will not go back. They will never forgive me, anyhow, so it is well to say no more about it."

"You will at least permit me to write," he began, but she interrupted him hastily.

"No, there is no need. I promised to write myself. I left a letter for them. They can have no immediate anxiety. I will write when I have decided what to do."

Adrian sighed. She was so self-willed, so obstinate upon this particular point, it seemed useless to reason with her. Experience, hard taskmistress, must be left

to teach her the wisdom of life. He could only register a mental vow to do what he could to shield her—to befriend her in every possible way. He determined also to have a long and serious talk with his mother, and try to convince her that it was her duty to restore the misguided girl to her own family; and, if need be, as a last resource, to write to them himself. It was very well for Eleanor that in this perilous crisis of her life she had so wise a counsellor and so true a friend as Adrian Brabant.

"Surely you have been working frightfully hard," she said, suddenly, extremely anxious to change the subject. "You look quite ill and careworn."

"I am working hard. Rickman is to produce my play at the Burlington in three weeks' time. If it is a success it may be presumed that the Brabant star shall have risen—if not, well, we are but where we were. Naturally it costs me some anxiety, and a good many sleepless nights."

Eleanor sat up with eager interest depicted on her face. These words suggested to her a vision of a new and wonderful life. Like many outsiders, she regarded literature and the drama with a mixture of wonder and adoration, not dreaming that their routine and detail are just as sordid and depressing as any "daily round or common task" in the world. She imagined only the successes, heard the applause, and saw the dazzling brilliance of the footlights, forgetting that the picture has its other side. Before she could reply, Madame came bustling into the room, red and annoyed.

"Mon Dieu, these vile shopkeepers! they will be the death of me. Eleanor, my love, it shames me to ask, but could you oblige, to get rid of him, a little five-pound note till to-morrow or next day, when Louis will bring large supplies from Froissart?"

Eleanor took out her purse, and handed it unopened to her friend.

"Take what you like," she said, with all the lavish generosity of a person who had never earned a penny,

and did not know the value of it. Madame, it must be supposed, had a grain of conscience left, since she declined this generous offer, and insisted that Eleanor should give her only what she asked.

Having received it with profound thanks and a hurried embrace, she hastened down to dismiss the persistent tradesman with words of triumphant scorn.

"Let that show you how things are with us," said Adrian, bitterly. "I have not exaggerated. Take my advice, and turn your back on this wretched establishment at once."

Eleanor only shook her head.





CHAPTER XVII.

"THEN YOU ARE LOST."

LATE that night Louis Brabant returned home from the Continent. His mother, sleeplessly awaiting his return, got up to receive him and to prepare a cup of hot coffee. Adrian heard nothing.

"A strange thing has happened," she said, with her finger on her lips. "What do you think, this very day?"

"Good luck," he said, with significant eagerness; but she shook her head dubiously.

"I fear it does not mean much to us. Eleanor Kerr has come."

He stared, profoundly surprised.

"Here—but why, what does it mean?"

"She has run away. Why, I know not, unless it be for your sake."

Louis shrugged his slim shoulders and drank his coffee meditatively.

"It is superfluous, unless, indeed, she brings her fortune with her."

"She has sixty pounds. I have had no talk with her, but I hardly think after our experience of her father that he will give her anything."

"If that is the case, then we must get rid of her."

Send her back with our compliments to the old man. It would be a nice little tit for tat."

She was a silly girl to come. She deserves the scolding she will get when she returns. Well, then, what luck? Was Uncle Theodore generous?"

"To the extent of a hundred francs, which I lost at roulette at Dieppe. I am minus a sou."

"That is bad—and your Aunt Fourmin—what did she say?"

"She talks of giving up—selling the good-will of the school, and taking a house in this country. She seemed not averse to the idea of having you with her there. A good sort is Aunt Louise."

"She is, and she is by no means poor, evidently. We will be considerate to her. I must remain here till the play is produced, and, anyhow, your aunt will not give up till the midsummer vacation."

"No. So she is here?" said Louis, meditatively, showing of what he was thinking. "Well, that is odd. The meeting with her will be awkward. To let her see quite plainly all is over; trying to a man's chivalry, is it not? But I trust I may rise to the occasion."

"Do not be too precipitate until I see," said Madame, cautiously, and bidding him good-night went off to bed to scheme till morning.

Eleanor woke from a heavy but unrefreshing slumber to an intolerable sense of depression and misery. She forgot for the moment where she was, awakened suddenly by a discord of street sounds, and when, in place of her spacious and luxurious chamber at Haugh, she saw the mean walls of her temporary resting-place, she realised that she had gained nothing by the change. The tiny, dingy, close-smelling room, the hard bed, the poor furniture, were all part of the reality which had in her case followed very fast on the ideal she had cherished, shattering it to the ground. She was fastidious in her personal tastes, having been able to gratify them all her life, and the cheap, sordid, grimy conditions under which she now found herself chafed

her intolerably. She dressed herself dully, often putting her hand to her head, which ached as if a band were bound round her brows. She had no hot water, not even the cheerful light of the gas—only a wretched candle spluttered and ran down the candlestick, offending her eye at every turn. It was half-past nine when, having heard no bell or summons of any kind, she descended to the sitting-room. The staircases were reeking with the smell of bacon and fried fish. It seemed to catch her breath, and she thought, with a sudden, sick pang of the large, bright, well-lighted and well-warmed breakfast room at Haugh, where the dainty appetising meal would be laid, and the fire shining on fine china and handsome, well-kept silver, which was the pride of Katie Niven.

"The fleshpots of Egypt," she said under her breath, and opening the sitting-room door somewhat timidly looked in. It was quite empty, and the fire looked cheery and inviting. Breakfast was on the table; an empty coffee-cup and plate, with some fragments of roll on it, indicated that someone had already breakfasted. Eleanor walked to the window, and pulling back the art muslin curtain, which hung limply, serving no ornamental or useful purpose, but only obscuring the meagre light, looked out. The fog had cleared, but the sky was grey and forbidding, the streets sloppy and wet, with a thin rain beginning to fall. The window looked out into the street, which was dull, but she could see out into the busier Edgeware Road, where the day's traffic was vigorously plying already.

She was so standing, listlessly, when the door opened, and Madame entered.

"Ah, my child, you have brought country hours to town," she said, with her usual effusiveness. "A thousand apologies. And have you slept? I meant to have come to your room with your coffee, but you have stolen a march upon me. But I was so tired. I did not sleep at all till near dawn. I trust you were comfortable."

Eleanor was too well-bred to complain, but too honest to prevaricate. She simply said she slept soundly, which was true.

"Louis came home just after midnight. Were you disturbed?"

"No," Eleanor replied, "I heard nothing."

Her colour rose. Madame saw it, but took no notice.

"He is also tired, and will not get up yet. Adrian has gone out, I see. He is the early bird. Let us hope he will catch the worm, and that it will be profitable feeding. Well, here is coffee. I remember you prefer tea. Shall I ever forget that laden breakfast-table at your home, more of *dejeuner* than a simple morning meal? but each country to its own habits and customs. Well, my dear, and how does the world look to you now you have slept? Your plans I wish to hear. In my glad surprise last night I seemed to think of nothing."

"I have no plans. I hope you will advise me, Madame," Eleanor replied, as she took her place at the table.

"Advice, my dear, costs nothing, but it is seldom of any use; that is why it is so cheap. Well, since you rely on me to that extent, you must be frank with me in all else. Tell me, then, what was your idea in coming to London?"

"Simply to get away from Haugh, which has become intolerable," replied Eleanor, truthfully.

"And having got away from Haugh, which I may say I consider quite a foolish proceeding, what do you propose to do?"

Eleanor looked at her blankly. Madame suavely smiled.

"These questions, my love, I see you regard as disagreeable; they are absolutely necessary. My son Louis returned from Froissart last night without a sou. We shall be bankrupt directly, unless Adrian's play scores a success, which, after all, is the very slenderest

of chances. We are devoted to you, but it is our misfortune that we can do nothing for you."

"I can work," said Eleanor, in a low voice, but her heart was sick. She felt as if the foundations of things were tottering under her feet.

"True—but in this city, more heaven than any place on earth for the rich, but the other place for the poor—there are thousands who pray only for work which they cannot get, and never will, because there are too many hands for every bit of work there is to do. You have taken a very unwise step. I would be less than your friend were I to advise you otherwise. You must go home, unless—"

"I will not," replied Eleanor, passionately. "But, unless—what—"

"Unless your father, who is rich, will give you money to live on. Suppose a case. Were you and Louis to marry, would he relent?"

"No. When he says a thing he stands by it. He would never forgive that, not give me a penny; nor will he ever allow me to go home."

"Then you are lost," replied Madame, calmly; "and you have been a fool for yourself."

"What do you mean by lost?"

"I mean that you are done for socially, that you have ruined your life. You may go and get work—teaching pianoforte playing, Heaven knows what—but whatever it be it will be abominable drudgery, which will slowly kill you. I say you have played the fool, and were I in your place I should go back this very day and beg for forgiveness, if need be, on my knees."

These words sounded terrible in the ears of Eleanor Kerr. Madame Brabant, though seeking by her candour to serve only herself, was showing the only possible kindness to the mistaken girl. It cost her nothing to utter them, since she had no real heart to be touched by misfortune.

"I see you are vexed, child; that you do not believe me. Well, let us talk of something else, something

brighter, if you will. After all, we must not trouble ourselves about the miseries of life until they are forced upon us."

In spite of this cheerful attempt on the part of Madame, the meal progressed most dismally. Eleanor could eat nothing. The food was indifferent, and there was no dainty appurtenances to tempt a feeble appetite; she was only able to drink her coffee, leaving the moist, heavy roll untouched. After breakfast Madame went to see the mistress of the house in her own sitting-room. Eleanor sat down to scan the morning papers, turning with a faint, melancholy smile to the employment columns. She was thus engaged when Louis Brabant entered the room. She sprang to her feet, and her face flushed painfully. He greeted her coolly, as he might have greeted any chance visitor.

"Good-morning, Miss Kerr. I trust you are well, and that you have recovered the fatigue of your journey."

He merely touched the hand she naturally held out in greeting, and rang the bell for his coffee.

"Disagreeable morning, is it not? London at this season of the year is altogether intolerable. Do you not think so?"

It was with difficulty Eleanor could command her voice sufficiently to speak. Remembering how the man had been at her feet, how he had waited upon her smile, had hung upon her lightest word, the bitterness of death was in her soul. His demeanour was distant, and yet touched with an odd familiarity which occasioned her a vague uneasiness. Had she known a little more of the world of men and things she would have understood that subtle change in his manner towards her. He imagined, and with cause, that she had sought him, a course which cheapened her in his eyes. She tried to say something, but words would not come. She held the paper up before her dazedly, with a mist before her eyes. The slatternly maid brought in the coffee, and when she withdrew, Louis, glancing at Eleanor, looked

a trifle put out. It was an awkward position, an awkward moment, of course, for both.

"Where has my mother gone, do you know?" he asked, irritably.

"I do not know," she replied, without lifting her head.

He then took a step nearer, and looked over the paper into her face.

"Eleanor, let us understand each other," he said, quickly. "What is the object of your coming to London?"

"I have already answered that question to your mother," she replied, coldly. "Spare me its repetition."

"We feel honoured by your confidence in and preference for us," he said, formally. "I suppose my mother has expressed her regret that we can make so little return for it?"

Eleanor made no remark, but the slow flame of indignant shame began to burn in her cheek.

"In happier circumstances there could have been but one ending to such a romance," he said; then, determined to move her somehow, "alas! that we should be pursued by such misfortune. We are indeed reduced to the last extremity. Let me, as a disinterested friend, urge your immediate return to Scotland."

The paper rustled faintly, but he could not see her face.

"Perhaps your environment is irksome, uncongenial, but there is money to redeem it. There are few pills in this life gold cannot gild—a sordid view, you think; I assure you it is the only true one. Gold is the only tyrant of man, it is the key to everything. Take the advice of those who suffer through its lack, and do not put such a gulf between you and it. You—"

Eleanor rose quite suddenly, without looking at him, and walked out of the room. He smiled and sat down to his coffee, which he drank leisurely, with the *Times* before him. His mother's entrance was the first interruption.

"Oh, you have come down. Where is Eleanor? Have you seen her?"

"I have. We have had some talk. I expect she will go home, probably to-day."

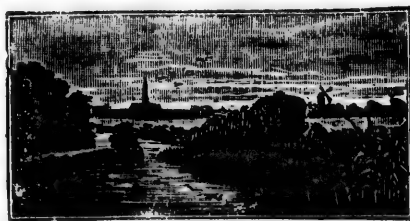
Madame looked eagerly interested.

"What passed? How did she comport herself? What did she say?"

"Now that I come to think of it, she said nothing. I contrived, I think, gracefully, to let her understand that there is no room in the inn. It was the better plan. The risk otherwise is too great."

"You were quite right. I, too, have talked to the same effect. She is as obstinate as a mule, and as ignorant as a baby. I shall contrive that she returns to-day. Where can Adrian have gone? I am in despair. Mrs. Bulstrode absolutely refuses further credit. What is to become of us if we are turned out of here?"

While mother and son discussed that knotty problem, Eleanor sat in her chill and dingy bedroom, with her head in her hands, and the bitterness of death in her soul.





CHAPTER XVIII.

"I HAVE MADE A MISTAKE."

ADRIAN BRABANT was early astir that morning, though his own business did not take him abroad. Nine o'clock was pealing as he walked out to the end of the street and crossed to the Edgeware Road Station, from which he took train to Gower Street. A short walk from thence brought him to his destination, the residential flats in Barker Street. It was a very early hour at which to call upon a lady, but the matter was urgent, and Miss Frances Sheldon was not a conventional person. She was sitting at her bachelor breakfast when the knock came to the door. Having no domestic, she opened it herself. She was a young woman of seven-and-twenty; and though she looked her age, there was a certain girlishness in her appearance which would remain with her likely for several years to come. Even her slightly mannish attire was not unbecoming to her, the stiff pink, linen collar, the neat black tie, and the tailor cut of her double-breasted jacket being even fascinating in their way. She wore her hair short, and the crisp brown waves looked as if they were carefully attended to, as indeed they were, Frances Sheldon being very dainty and fastidious in her way. Her

speech was a trifle free, as was inevitable, owing to the conditions of her life.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Brabant. Pray, walk in, and tell me what on earth you mean by coming at such an untimely hour. I am taking breakfast in the scullery. If you do not object to a scullery on principle we'll return there. It is warm, and I can give you a cup of good coffee."

"It is very good of you to receive me at all," he said, gratefully. "I have an urgent reason for this untimely intrusion, and my excuse is that if I had not come early I should not have known where to find you. When do you go out?"

"I have an appointment at half-past ten in Salisbury Square. It is only half-past nine now. I can give you a good half-hour. What is the business? Won't you take off your coat?"

"Thanks, I will. I had no idea a scullery could be such a cosy place," he said, as he took off his coat. The warmth and comfort of the odd little place were grateful to him. He was not strong; and of late he had had little personal comfort.

"There are sculleries *and* sculleries," observed Miss Sheldon, severely. "I spend a good deal of time in mine in this cold weather; therefore, I make it habitable."

She opened the little corner cupboard and took from it another cup and plate, fetched a chair from the adjoining sitting-room, and set it close to the gas stove, which glowed cheerily.

"Have you seen the Rickmans lately, and what about the play? I am doing what I can in my humble way to prepare an ungrateful public for it. I hope you are putting plenty of fine clothes in it; that's the sort of thing for these degenerate days. Besides, it gives the lady journalist a chance. I'll revel in them, and bag all the space I can for them in the *Pioneer* and the *Hour-Glass*."

"It is very kind of you to take so much interest in it.

I believe the dresses are very fine. The money they are going to spend on them certainly appalled me. But that is not what I came about. Have you time to do a kind act this very day?"

"I'll take time if you show me a good reason why," said Miss Sheldon, as she deftly cut some slices from her brown loaf.

"I ought to tell you the whole story, but it would take too long; though one day I will tell it, if you will allow me. The case is simply this—a young lady in whom we are interested came up from Scotland yesterday, and she must not remain where she is. She will not return to her home, though it would be her wisest course. Will you let her come here?"

Miss Sheldon rubbed the point of her shapely nose meditatively, and her face was grave.

"Here, in this very house, do you mean? Do you know the size of it?"

"No."

"Well, I have two places besides this, and they are like boxes—big enough for me and my things; but where could I put another? Still, under pressure, it could be done. Tell me more about her. Has she run away?"

"Well, I suppose it is the right word to use," said Adrian, for sometimes the plain speech of Frances Sheldon rather startled him.

"And why has she taken the fatal step? Has she ambitions?"

"I don't think so," he replied, and his difficulty increased. It was certainly no easy matter to escape the sharp questioning of Miss Sheldon, and yet it was impossible to tell her the whole truth.

"There are lots of Scotch girls here; they work like hatters and have constitutions of cast-iron," remarked Miss Sheldon, cheerfully. "But, Mr. Brabant, confess that you are a trifle vague about this friend of yours—yet you expect me to take her in here. Do you know what a sacrifice you are asking me to make?—to give

up my freedom, nothing less. I had a partner in this little concern once, when times were hard, and it was either that or quit; and when I got rid of her, I said that I would go on bread and water when low-water came, and keep my house to myself."

"If that is so, do not let us say any more about it," said Adrian, quickly. "There is no reason why you should make such a sacrifice for Miss Kerr or for any one."

"Well, but I think I feel rather interested. I know you well enough to believe that you have a very good and kind reason for asking such a thing. Can you tell me any more? Is she poor?"

"She is; but her father is a country gentleman. She was at school with my aunt, Madame Fourmin, in Paris. We met her there, and she travelled a few weeks with us. There has been some difference at her home, owing to a love affair, and she feels that in the meantime she cannot remain there."

"And has she any ideas, say, on the subject of work?" inquired Miss Sheldon, meditatively. "Because the most of us in this London have to remember, in season and out of season, that if a man will not work neither shall he eat."

"She must work, of course, if she stays here, but we are in hopes that she will yet return to Scotland."

"And what you wish is that I take her here for a few days just now?"

"If you would," said Adrian, eagerly. "It would be doing her a great service, and I should be ever grateful."

Miss Sheldon was perplexed, but rather interested.

"Very well, let her come to-day. After my appointment I have four hours' work in Fleet Street. I can be ready for her here at four o'clock. Will that do?"

"Admirably. I thank you sincerely. You have granted a great boon, and asked no questions. You

will probably understand everything better than I can tell you when you see her."

"Oh, pray, don't mention thanks. I would do a great deal more than that at a pinch. Perhaps I may like her, and we may get on well together. I confess it is the very atmosphere of mystery shrouding the case which interests me. It will be something new in sensations. Well, are you going? Good-morning; wrap up well; the cold seems to have a peculiarly biting quality this morning, and good people are scarce."

She shook hands with him cordially, and the smile with which she dismissed him cheered him on his way. It died from her face, however, when she shut the door and began to gather her breakfast things together. Yielding to the kind impulse of the moment, she had done what she had resolved never to do again—agreed to share her little home with another. And the prospect imparted an additional chill to that dreary day. Adrian Brabant returned to Edgeware Road by omnibus, and it was after eleven before he reached the house. Louis, not wishing a further interview with Eleanor, had gone out, and Adrian found his mother alone.

"Where have you been to, Adrian?" she inquired, as he entered. "You said nothing last night about an early appointment."

"I had none," he answered, curtly. "Is Louis up yet?"

"Yes; he, too, has gone out."

"And where is Miss Kerr?"

"In her room. She has the sulks. I believe she is packing her box again."

"To go home?"

"I should not think it; but she will leave here undoubtedly."

"And would you let her go without even asking her destination?"

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Adrian, I have enough to worry me without carrying this stupid and headstrong girl on my

shoulders. She is nothing to me. She has thrust herself upon us. We cannot be responsible for her. I have given her the best advice in my power. She scorns it, but my hands are clean."

"Something must be done for her. I will myself write to her mother. In the meantime I have made arrangements for her."

Madame smiled.

"You!" she said, with emphasis. "What are you going to do with her?"

"Miss Sheldon, Rickman's niece, who lives in Barker Street Chambers, has agreed to take her."

"You have been there this morning, then?"

"I have."

"Ah, well, you give yourself much trouble for one who is entirely ungrateful. Miss Sheldon is a strong-minded young woman. She will speedily bring our misguided one to her senses. Can she take her to-day?"

"Yes, at four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Then I had better tell Eleanor. I can call her here, and you will tell her yourself."

Adrian nodded, and Madame went upstairs, to find Eleanor already dressed with her outdoor garments, and her box ready to be lifted.

"You are going, dear child, I see. Where, may I ask?" she inquired, blandly.

"I do not at present know, but it would not interest you to know," Eleanor replied, quietly. "I have made a mistake, Madame—one I am not likely to repeat."

"I trust you will not, and that in future you will realise when you are well off. Are you going home, to-day?"

"I am not going home."

"Then where are you going? I must insist on knowing. Since you have come to us I must not allow you to leave like this. I might be blamed if any harm came to you."

"You have shown me that I am unwelcome here

all you need know now is that I shall no longer trouble you," replied Eleanor, stiffly.

"There you are spiteful, dear child, and that is unlady-like. Adrian is below wishing to speak to you. He has been out all the morning on your behalf, and has some definite plan in view. Will you see him?"

"Yes."

With this curt monosyllable Eleanor followed Madame downstairs. She could no longer be cordial or even civil to her, so strong had her repulsion become. She now saw the woman in her true light, a plotter and schemer without principle or heart. Oh, how bitterly she had been deceived! At sight of Adrian's sympathetic and kindly face a softer mood returned to her. She sat down wearily on the chair he placed for her, and waited for him to speak. She did not feel herself able to utter a word. The whole situation was unreal, strained, intolerable. She felt like one in a dream.

"My mother tells me you are going, but not home, Miss Kerr. May I beg you to listen to me for a moment?"

She nodded, and put her hand up to her cheek.

"You know no one in London. It is impossible you can go and live alone—even while your money lasts. I have just been to a friend of mine, or, to speak more accurately, a friend of the Rickmans, whose name you know. This lady lives alone in a flat near Gower Street. She is a lady journalist, charming, womanly, true-hearted. You will be sure to like her. If only you will go to her to-day, when you leave here, you will have someone to talk to, and to advise you much better than I can."

"If she will allow me to pay for my lodgings, as I should do elsewhere, I am quite willing to go," replied Eleanor, but without enthusiasm.

"She will certainly allow that; in fact you could not go on any other footing," he replied, frankly. "Miss Sheldon has to earn her own living, and I believe she has no superfluous means."

"Then can I go at once?" said Eleanor, rising with alacrity.

"Not yet. Miss Sheldon has to be out all day in pursuit of her calling. She will not return till four o'clock, when she will be ready to receive you. She expects that you will come."

"It is only twelve now," said Eleanor, disappointedly, longing to be gone from the place where she had met such complete disillusionment.

"I am free this afternoon—it is at your disposal," said Adrian, with his usual kind thoughtfulness. "It is brighter out of doors now, and I daresay we could find something to interest us. We need not come back here unless you wish. I will see that your luggage is sent direct to Barker Street."

She looked at him with such a wealth of gratitude in her heavy eyes, that he felt inwardly moved. His kind heart bled for her. She had taken a foolish and rash step, and the consequences were causing her to pass through much bitter humiliation. He entered into her inward feelings more keenly and thoroughly than she knew. Within fifteen minutes they had left the house, Eleanor parting from Madame Brabant coolly and curtly. When the door closed, and she felt the fresh, cool air on her face, she turned to her companion with a sudden, sweet smile.

"Now I can breathe. Your goodness to me, Adrian, I shall never forget while I live. It has kept me from despair."

She was at her best with him. His was one of those rare natures that possess that exquisite capacity—the power to draw forth the best and the most lovable attributes of all with whom they come in contact. His unselfishness was unbounded, his consideration, delicacy, and tact amazing. He had indeed redeemed an awkward and compromising situation from everything objectionable. Eleanor owed more to him than she yet knew. The hardness vanished from her face, the bitter ring from her voice. She was with a friend in whom

she trusted absolutely and implicitly. He was smoothing the way for her—for the time being the clouds had lifted, and the sun shone again that winter day upon London streets.





CHAPTER XIX.

"I SHOULD NOT HAVE THOUGHT YOU KNEW
SO MUCH."

FRANCES SHELDON and her guest sat talking over the fire in the cosy little sitting-room at Barker Street, and it was evident that they had found plenty to talk about. The place was tiny, and the furniture was not substantial, but it had a certain airy prettiness about it, and the basket-chairs were comfortable enough lounges after a hard day's work. Miss Sheldon leaned back in hers as if she enjoyed it, and her face wore an interested look. She had donned a silk blouse in honour of her guest, and her feet were as daintily slippers as Eleanor's own. Their meeting had been rather a curious experience, but after a cup of tea and a little talk on commonplace subjects, they were beginning to feel at home with each other.

"Do you know," said Frances, whimsically, "when I saw you come in I felt that I had presumed frightfully to ask you here?"

"Why?" asked Eleanor in wonder.

"Why, because you have the air of a grand dame, and that coat you wear would buy up all this poor little show. If you were in a position where you could get

such lovely clothes, what on earth induced you to leave it?"

"Clothes are not everything," observed Eleanor, wisely.

"They are a good deal. It is one of the thorns in my flesh that I cannot afford to be really well dressed. That is why I wear skirts and tailor-mades; they don't get so quickly shabby as other things."

"I thought girls who live like this, so independently I mean, didn't care how they looked."

"Oh, that's a frightful mistake. I believe when a woman grows careless of her appearance there is something sapping the springs of her welfare. I say, how long have you known the Brabants?"

"Not so very long, only since last year, when I went to school at Madame Fourmin's."

"I was there, too; that was how I knew them, and, of course, I met them since at my Uncle Rickman's. So you only left school last year! May I ask how old you are?"

"I shall soon be twenty."

"Twenty! Why, you are a mere child. I am seven-and-twenty, and sometimes I feel a good deal more. Twenty! you look older. How did you like Madame Fourmin?"

"Not particularly. Did you?"

"No, but her French is good, and she is preferable to Madame Brabant. Did you ever meet a more insufferable person in your life than Madame Brabant?"

"I used to like her, but now I think she is not sincere."

"Sincere!" Frances Sheldon laughed in pure amusement. "She is one of the sort who will never speak the truth if a lie will do. Don't look so shocked. I am not exaggerating—in fact I can hardly do her justice, and her elder son takes after her—a precious scamp he is."

Eleanor coloured.

"They have been very unfortunate. It is trying for them to have no position, to be unable to live on their estates," she ventured to say.

"What estates?" inquired Frances, blankly.

"Their estates. They are too poor to live on them."

"But where are they?"

"At Froissart. I have seen them; the Chateau has been pointed out to me."

"There is a Chateau Brabant there, I believe, and I have heard of our friends laying claim to it before. Do you know who Madame Brabant was before her marriage?"

"No."

"A schoolmistress, the daughter of an old fossil who taught languages in third-rate schools. She married Oliver Brabant, who taught French in Bloomsbury. They are nothing; they trade on their name, because it has some honourable representatives in France. They are frauds, my dear; they have neither a stone nor a sou to their credit in any country under the sun."

"Is this true?" asked Eleanor, blankly.

"It is as true as I sit here. Did you believe that nice little romance of Madame's?"

"I had no reason to disbelieve it; and I cannot understand yet how anybody should tell such deliberate falsehood."

Frances Sheldon elevated her eyebrows. "Wait till you have knocked about the world as I have, you will have every sympathy with David, when he said—'All men are liars.' But to return to our mutual friends. If you do not think me too curious, would you mind telling me how you managed to get so intimate with them?"

"One gets very friendly travelling," replied Eleanor, rather vaguely. "And Madame Brabant and her son have visited me at my home."

"Have they? Which son?"

"The elder."

Frances Sheldon, while apparently asking her questions carelessly, was really watching Eleanor closely, and some things began to appear clear which had rather mystified her heretofore.

"Well, if you will take my advice, you will keep them at arms' length. I do assure you they will only be kind to you for their own ends."

"Is Adrian the same?" inquired Eleanor, rather hopelessly.

"Oh, Adrian—no!—he is good and true; in fact, how he ever came of such a stock is one of the unsolved problems of life. He is one of the best of men. How much his infirmity may have had to do with it I don't know, but his nature is utterly unselfish. It is an education in Christianity even to know him."

"You speak enthusiastically."

"I speak of what I know."

"Do you think him clever?"

Frances nodded.

"A genius. Rickman thinks so, too. Tell me how many men in London are there who would have taken as much trouble for you as he has done? And the exquisite thing about it is that he would do just the same for me or for any other woman in need. He does good for love of good, and, let me tell you, that is a very rare quality."

Eleanor sat still, ruminating not unpleasantly. Frances Sheldon had the power to interest. She chose her words well, and her frankness was delightful. It inspired in Eleanor a feeling of trust. Frances still watched her keenly—being deeply interested. She could not help admiring the fine figure in its plain gown of exquisite cut and style, the beautiful high-bred face, the ruddy hair lying so becomingly on the square, white brow.

"Are you going to tell me anything about yourself?" she asked presently, in that direct way which often amused, sometimes embarrassed, but never gave actual offence.

"What would you like to know?"

"Oh, heaps of things; for instance, are you in earnest about not going back home?"

"Quite."

"But why? Does your stern parent want you to marry some objectionable party?"

"No—but I don't get on at home. They do not

understand me. I am miserable myself there, and make everybody else miserable."

"Have you a mother?"

"Yes."

"A good one?"

"Oh, very—too good, I think. She considers everybody but herself."

Frances Sheldon got up rather hastily, and took a turn across the room. It was to hide her wet eyes.

"And yet you have left her. Do you know I would give ten, ay twenty years of my life to have a mother—good, bad, or indifferent? The first real desolation of life comes home to a girl, I can tell you, when she is made motherless."

Eleanor had nothing to say to this passionate outburst, which rather surprised her.

"Has it ever occurred to you what dreadful torture your mother will be in about you?" was Frances' next question.

"She knows I am all right. I told her where I was going, and that she need not be anxious."

"And you think that will be enough for her? Wait till you have children of your own."

"Your mother is dead, then?"

"Yes, she died when I was thirteen. I can soon tell you all there is to tell about myself. My father is a clergyman, the vicar of a microscopic parish among the Lincolnshire fens. He had the misfortune to have five daughters. Three of them are governesses—two of them miserable, and the other happy. I choose this because it makes me more independent. Last year I made a hundred and thirty pounds—nearly as much as my father. The dear old dad does not quite understand it, and my sister Caroline, who keeps house, is not quite sure whether I am a proper person. It is only within the last six months I have been able to afford this flat, and I am as proud of it as any new wife is of her country mansion or her suburban villa."

"It is very pretty, though it is so small," observed Eleanor.

"It's mine—my home ; every stick in it is paid with my own earnings. I had my dad and Carrie up for Christmas. Dad had the bedroom, and Carrie and I slept on this floor, and used the scullery as a dressing-room ; and we were happy and jolly, I can tell you. Daddy had not had a holiday in London since before mother died, and he did have a good time. I had to do without a meat dinner for three weeks after they were gone, and I'd gone without it cheerfully for three months to have had the joy of them here. Of course, they did not know. There's a delightful vagueness about my occupation which leaves plenty of margin for romancing—that sort of romancing which will be forgiven, because it makes happy those we love."

"You write, don't you?"

"My dear, treat me respectfully. I am a lady journalist. I am Guinevere of the *Pioneer*, and Aunt Mildred of the *Hour-Glass*, besides contributing ladies' letters to a lot of provincial papers, and precious hard work it is, I can tell you, and precarious as well."

"You make me feel very mean," said Eleanor.

Frances Sheldon nodded complacently.

"I want to. You are not half grateful for your mercies, which appear to be legion. And now, what do you suppose you are going to do in London, if you do stay? Let me hear a category of your qualifications."

"They are not very many ; but I have had an expensive education."

"Which mostly guarantees nothing," observed Frances, with dry sarcasm. "My father taught me all I know, and for good general knowledge I can buy up half the girls of my acquaintance. That's why I've got on. Well, to be more explicit, are you musical?"

"Yes."

"Do you paint?"

"Yes, but not well ; but I can speak French, and write it now as fluently as English."

"That's good. Any German?"

"German, too. I have an aptitude for languages. I can write shorthand."

"Can you?" Frances looked at her guest with a considerable access of respect.

"I should not have thought you knew so much," she observed, frankly. "Your prospects begin to improve. You might, with these qualifications, get the post of amanuensis or secretary. But they are hard to get; dozens gasping for every vacancy. But we must do our best. Would you take a situation of that kind?"

"Of any kind; but daily work I should prefer, so that I might come back here to you in the evenings."

"I shouldn't mind having you," said Frances, with condescension. "But I fully expect that your relatives will be here immediately to fetch you home."

"They can't take me against my will."

"No; but I think you ought to go. Meantime, however, while we wait for them, and are on the lookout for something to do, how much money have you?"

"Fifty pounds! I had sixty when I came, but Madame Brabant had some, and I paid my expenses."

"Oh, you are quite rich. You can afford to wait. I have never seen so much money at one time, and I don't think I want to, in case I never recover it. I am in a state of chronic poverty. You see I pay forty pounds for these rooms."

"Forty pounds! Why, we can get a big house at home for that."

"Oh, I daresay. I could rent a manor-house in Lincoln for less, but this is London, and my rooms are not considered dear; then I have to live and clothe myself, and pay my taxes, and send something home when I can; and sometimes there are other girls requiring a little help. I have over nine pounds out on loan just now, but I can't count on that."

Eleanor sat still, saying nothing, but mind and heart were full. For the first time in her existence she found herself face to face with the reality of life as embodied in the experience of Frances Sheldon. Here was a girl

not so much older than herself, and endowed with equal or perhaps deeper capacity for the enjoyment of all the prizes of life, cheerfully toiling to keep herself independent and respectable, and denying herself to give a little enjoyment to those she loved, and to help others in greater need than herself. And through it all so brave and bright and sunny-hearted, extracting sunshine from common things and from homely pleasures, treating privation as a little joke, and grateful with no common gratitude for the least cessation from sordid care.

Eleanor Kerr thought of her own lot in life, of the abundance that had been heaped upon her all her days, of her luxurious home, her generous father, her unselfish mother, and grew sick with shame. Frances observed her stricken face, and rejoiced over it. It was a healthy and a wholesome sign.

Adrian Brabant had these two girls much in his mind that night, anxious with no common anxiety over the result of his experiment.

He need not have been afraid. Through his instrumentality it was given to Frances Sheldon to awaken the soul of Eleanor Kerr.





CHAPTER XX.

"THIS I CAN SET MY NAME TILL."

MRS. KERR sat by the fire in her own dressing-room, her white face looking wistfully across at Mary Heron, who occupied the opposite chair. They were talking of Eleanor. It was the third day after her flight, and nothing had been heard of her. The shock had prostrated the mistress of Haugh. She had risen from her bed that day for the first time.

"Her father will not allow me even to speak her name, and I cannot mention my anxiety to Claud. I am thankful you have come," she said, wearily. "What do you think?"

"I think, dear Mrs. Kerr, that Eleanor will certainly come back," said Mary, hopefully.

"I don't agree with you—but even if she did come back, her father will not allow her inside the door. He has sworn it; he was in a dreadful passion, and has hardly been sober since. Oh, Mary Heron, are you not afraid to marry a Kerr? They are but an ill set o' folk."

"No, I am not afraid," answered Mary, bravely, though her colour rose a little. "But Mr. Kerr would never stick to that. He would be the very first to bid Eleanor welcome if she came back."

"You don't know him. He keeps up a grudge a long

time. Just look how he has treated Bailie Chisholm since that law-suit about the town's land; he will not even let his eyes light on him. Besides, if Eleanor has gone to the Brabants, she is either married to the man, or not. He is quite fit to inveigle her into a mock marriage to try and get her money; then, when he finds Mr. Kerr relentless, he will cast her off. My poor misguided bairn!"

"Dear Mrs. Kerr, Eleanor is not like that. She sees further than most people. I am sure she won't go near the Brabants."

"Then what can she do? She's a perfect bairn, though she thinks she knows more than me."

"She'll probably wait in London, or wherever she has gone, till her money's all done, and that'll bring her to her senses," observed Mary with the strong conviction of one who had proved her own words. "Were I Claud I'd go to London and seek her," she continued. "Shall I tell him so? Mr. Kerr could make no objection to that."

"He would, and he keeps Claud so tight of ready-money that I don't believe he'd have enough to pay his fare."

"Could not you give it to him?"

"I, lassie! I never have any money—a shilling or two is all you'll find in my purse—year in, year out. Mr. Kerr pays everything, and grudges nothing; at the same time he thinks women can't take care of money, and I never have any."

"I shouldn't like that," observed Mary. "I hope Claud won't treat me like that?"

"Oh, he won't; he's more like the Dunlops, but you'll need to begin as you mean to end with him. It's now you have the making of your own way with him. He is very fond of you, Mary."

Mary got up rather quickly, and walked over to the window. She felt guilty under the eyes of Claud's mother, knowing how the love was all on his side. It was winter still in Kinghorn, though February was nearing to a close; the snow still lay at the dykesides and be-

tween the furrows, waiting for more. The sea was very grey and stormy yet, and the sky had none of the dappled softness of spring in its leaden pallor. But all the same, spring was hastening, and under the snow the buds were waxing strong and glad.

"Here's the Castlebar carriage, Mrs. Kerr. Will you see Mrs. Allardyce?"

"Most certainly. I wonder that she has not been up by this time."

"She did not know till yesterday what had happened. Somebody told her in Kirkcaldy, and she didn't believe it. It put her about very much."

"Well, let her up; and go down, will you, Mary, and see if the little cupboard in the smoke-room is locked? If it isn't, lock it, and bring me the keys."

Already Mrs. Kerr was treating Mary like a daughter of the house, showing in a hundred little ways the change the engagement had made.

Had Mary loved Claud as he loved her, his mother's sweet recognition of the new bond would have been an additional joy: as it was, it always stabbed her, she felt guilty, treacherous and mean. She left the room, and was downstairs in time to meet Mrs. Allardyce in the hall.

"Oh, Mary Heron, how are you? Is the mistress in her bed? Will she see me, think you? I've had a letter from Eleanor."

"From Eleanor? You have!"

"Yes; queer, isn't it? There's no accounting for what lassies will do. I was away to Edinburgh this morning afore the letters came, and I only got it at three o'clock. I didn't wait to tak' aff my things."

"And where is she?"

"In London, safe and sound, and not wi' the ill folk."

"Run up and tell Mrs. Kerr. It will relieve her mind very much."

Mrs. Allardyce nodded, and went quickly upstairs. She was struck by the extremely fragile look of Mrs.

Kerr as she entered the room, and the conviction came home to her that these dreadful anxieties were sapping the springs of life in the mistress of Haugh.

"I am glad to see you," said Mrs. Kerr, with a wan smile. "I expected you before now."

"Bless me, I only heard the thing yestreen; an' the day I was obliged to go to Edinburgh on some law business," replied Mrs. Allardyce. "But I've not come to cast up, but—to bring, what think you? read that."

She laid the letter in Mrs. Kerr's lap. A faint cry or surprise broke from the anxious mother's pale lips as she recognised the writing.

Thus did Eleanor write to Robert Allardyce's mother:—

"BARKER STREET CHAMBERS, W.C.,

"February 24.

"DEAR MRS. ALLARDYCE,—You will be astonished to hear from me, but I prefer to write to you rather than to my own people: why, I cannot explain, but there it is. You are always so sensible and so quick, you will not so readily misunderstand me perhaps as some. I want you to go up to Haugh and tell my mother that I am all right. I am living with a young lady, a clergyman's daughter, who is engaged in journalistic work. I intend to remain here and work. Miss Sheldon thinks that my French and my knowledge of shorthand should get me a situation soon. She will do her best. She has made me feel that I have lived an idle, useless life, and I want to try and do better in future. She and others have advised me to go back, but this I cannot do yet. Please say to mamma that I am very sorry for all the trouble and misery I have caused her, and I hope she will be happier without me. If I ever do come back, I hope I shall be a comfort to her. Give my love to Claud and to Mary. I am afraid to send any message to papa. Tell mamma that she was right and I was wrong about the Brabants. They are all she said, and more, except Adrian, who is a truly good man. Now, I will not write any more. I am afraid to read over this letter, because

I know it is very incoherent. Miss Sheldon would not let me wait another day to write, so I have done it. I know you will not think it a trouble to go to Haugh to tell them.—I am, yours sincerely,

“ELEANOR KERR.

“Tell mamma if she is anxious or doubting, I can give her the address of Miss Sheldon’s father, a vicar in Lincolnshire ; and ask her when she feels she can forgive me to write me a few lines.—E. K.”

“Thank God !”

These two words fell brokenly from the pale lips of Alison Kerr, and tears of relief and thankfulness stood in her eyes.

“What do you think of it ?” she asked, turning eagerly to her friend, who stood by, but with her head averted ; feeling that Alison Kerr’s sorrow ought to be her own.

“I think weel o’t. There is nae doot that Providence has watched ower the misguided bairn. Praise be to His name !”

Such expressions were not common on the lips of Margaret Allardyce. But she was at that moment most deeply moved.

“Now that I know where she is, I can breathe. I will show her father this letter, Margaret, and he may then wish her to come home.”

“I think it would be a mistake to bring her hame the noo.”

“Why ?”

“Because it will do her good to be left for a wee to her own doing. Even to feel the pinch of poverty wad do her no ill. Leave her, Alison ; that’s my advice to you.”

“Would you then have no anxiety ? Do you think she will be all right with this Miss Sheldon ? Would you write to her father ?”

“No, I wadna. If you like, Alison, I’ll go to London and see Eleanor.”

Mrs. Kerr was silent for a moment, her breast heaving.

"May God bless you, Margaret Allardyce, for ever and ever?"

"It wad be a ploy for me, an' naebody but Rob need ken where I've gaen."

"I wish Alec would let me go, too."

"He winna; nor would it be wise," said Mrs. Allardyce, flatly. "Queer, isn't it, how my heart has warmed to Eleanor since she ran awa'? I feel as if I could stand up for her to the world. No that I approve o' her conduct to you, for she has been far frae dutifu', but I like to see a guid spunk in man or woman."

Mrs. Kerr smiled, the first smile that had touched her lips for many days.

"An' were I you I would say naething to Mr. Kerr about letting her come hame. The letter! well, you could show him that if you like; it could do nae harm. Tak' my word for it, Alison, if ye lippen a wee, a' thing will come richt."

Alison Kerr stretched out her hand, took that of Mrs. Allardyce, and laid her cheek against it. It was her way of saying what she felt, that God had sent a message of hope and comfort and strength through the lips of her friend.

"And I'll go to London on Monday morning."

"Really?"

"Ay will I, an' maybe, when I bring back my word that Eleanor's a' richt, ye'll rise up an' be yersel' again, for ye are a weary-faced body the noo, an' nae mistak'. It would a needed me to fecht the battles in Haugh, an' you tae sit still in the quiet biggin' at Castlebar, where care never comes. Things are queerly arranged, are they not, Alison? but the Almighty kens best."

"There is a great deal of truth in what you say, Mrs. Allardyce," said Alison Kerr, musingly. "You would have been the very woman for Haugh. It is too much for me."

Mrs. Allardyce shook her head.

"It was well for me that I got George Allardyce for

my man instead o' yours; it would have made me a wicked woman, wi' the temper o' the very deil. Weel, then, I maun go an' meet Rob, if I bena too late. Mary Heron, eident lassie, is a comfort to you."

"She is indeed."

"That's ae thing I covet, Alison, the guid dochter ye are to get; but now I'm haverin'—guid-bye."

She left the room somewhat hurriedly, wiping her eyes as she went downstairs. Meeting no one in the hall, she let herself out, and drove away to the station, her mind full of the Kerrs and their affairs.

The train came in just as she drove down past the hotel, and she met her son on the station brae.

"I've been up at Haugh, Rob. I'm glad I'm in time."

"And is it true that Eleanor has gone?"

He asked the question eagerly, and his face bore traces of his anxiety.

"Jump in; not only is it true, but I've had a letter the day from Eleanor hersel'. I left it at Haugh."

"A letter from Eleanor to you! And is she married to the Frenchman?"

"Not she. If she's seen onything o' them ava, she's quit o' them noo. But she's gaun to bide in London an' earn her livin'."

"If not to marry the Frenchman, why on earth did she run away at all?" Allardyce asked, in amazement, and it was evident his relief was great.

"Guid kens, but I'm gaun to London on Monday to sec."

"You go to London!" Allardyce turned to his mother in sheer surprise. "Why should you go? It's their business at Haugh, is it not?"

"Nae doubt, but Kerr himsel' has taken the gee an' winna let the lassie's name be mentioned. Claud canna gang unless his father lets him. The mistress is in bed, so wha is there?"

"But I thought you did not like Eleanor?"

Mrs. Allardyce smiled a kind of queer unreadable smile.

"There's something in her, and the letter has gaen to my heart. So off I go on Monday. Ye'll say to naebody, Rob, whaur I am, or what my errand. There's enough clashes in the countryside. We'll keep that bit to oorsels."

"All right, mother" replied Allardyce, but he looked queerly, for this turn of events was well-nigh past his comprehension.

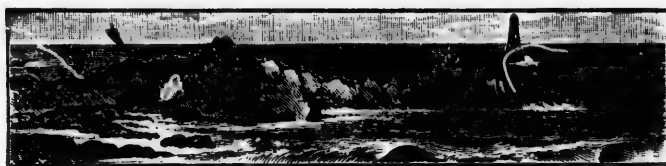
"To earn her own living," he repeated, presently. "Miss Kerr of Haugh!"

His mother did not immediately reply. They had ascended the brae, and she was looking up towards the wooded slope whereon Haugh stood fairly—its face to the sea, and the setting sun upon its windows flashing royally.

"I've had mony a day to thank the Lord for His tender mercies to me an' mine, laddie," she said, dreamily. "It was a black day for me when they bore your father over the door-stane to the kirkyard, but I hae in my heart the blessed memory of a man that revered his Maker, an' served his day and generation weel. Alison Kerr has her man spared, but hers is a livin' sorrow, which is the warst o' a' to bear. For me, I can say, O Death where is thy sting, O Grave where is thy victory? an' Heaven's no faur awa'."

Allardyce perceived that these things had stirred the great deeps of his mother's nature. He had never in his life heard her so speak, and he sat by her side awestricken and dumb. But she seemed, though talking to him by name, to have forgotten him. Her face wore an uplifted look, her spirit seemed in communion with the unseen.

"Mind this, my son," she said, after a long silence. "You are young, and I am auld, an' in my time I've seen a lot. And this I can set my name till, that there is nothing in this life worth striving for but only to do your duty by God an' man; an' keep the will o' your Maker afore your e'en aye. So did your father live, blessing a' thing he touched, an' his end was peace."



CHAPTER XXI.

"AN EXAMPLE WE ARE EVER READY TO FORGET."

ON Monday morning Mrs. Allardyce departed for the south, not taking much gear in her train. Robert took her to Edinburgh and saw her off in the London train, and as he ascended the steps of the Waverley Station he was overtaken by Mr. Kerr, who had just come in by the fast from Kirkcaldy.

"What are you doing here, lad?" he asked, letting his great hand fall on Allardyce's back. "I saw Pitcairn just now, and he said you were at the London train."

"So I was," replied Allardyce, but not cordially.

"Who's going south?"

"My mother."

"London?"

"Yes."

"Humph! you're on the close side this morning, so I'll be off to Lauriston about some cattle. What train are you going back by?"

"Two o'clock."

"I'll maybe see you then; good-morning," he said, brusquely, and strode away.

If he had any inkling of Mrs. Allardyce's business in London, he made no sign. Allardyce smiled as he

nodded and crossed the street, having some bank business in George Street which would occupy the morning.

Mrs. Allardyce arrived in London early in the evening, and drove to the Langham Hotel, to which her husband had taken her on their brief honeymoon so many years before. Yet so vividly was that happy time before her that she remembered the very numbers of their rooms, and asked for the same. Fortunately they were available, and as she sat by the fire in the comfortable sitting-room, which was unchanged in arrangement, she was glad of her solitude; glad to be alone with the memories which were wholly tender and sweet. Few knew what a wealth of hidden tenderness and romance lay under the rugged and blunt exterior of the mistress of Castlebar; how she cherished trifling mementoes as sacredly as any schoolgirl. That solitary evening in the hotel was not painful to her, though the death of her idolised husband had nearly killed her. Although she was a woman who had very little to say upon religious matters, her faith in the goodness of God, her hopes in the future blessed life, were absolutely unassailable. And in her inmost heart she lived so near to the unseen that she often felt as if the veil which hid her from her beloved was scarcely a barrier. That was the side of the woman's nature hid from the world, even from her one son, who had made her widowed life tolerable. Have we not all our hidden side which the world knows not of, which is sometimes hidden even from those who walk with us day by day, whose lot in life we share? Truly, the heart of man is known only to his Maker.

Having kept herself so still and quiet that one night, alone, but far from lonely in the great city, Margaret Allardyce awoke next morning alert and concerned for the welfare of others, intent upon the business which had brought her to London. About eleven o'clock a smart brougham, supplied by the hotel (Mrs. Allardyce was conservative in the matter of vehicles, and hansomc were her *bête noir*), bore her down to the mansions in

Barker Street, where Eleanor Kerr had found a temporary home. She was not greatly surprised to find the door locked, and nobody to give her any information except the porter, who said vaguely that Miss Sheldon might be back by five or six; but her movements were uncertain, her times of coming and going governed by no law. Of the other lady he knew nothing, even by name.

Mrs. Allardyce, however, did not spend an idle day. She managed to see one or two other friends, and after a comfortable early dinner, drove again to Barker Street about seven o'clock. The girls had only been in long enough to get their fire lighted and their evening meal prepared. As she stood a moment on the landing to recover her breath after the stairs, Mrs. Allardyce heard a peal of girlish laughter—so genuine, so spontaneous, and so infectious, that it provoked a smile on her own lips, and brought a satisfied look into her eyes. Such laughter does not come from a heavy heart. If times were hard with the two working women within, care sat lightly upon them. Frances Sheldon opened the door in response to the visitor's knock, and appeared awestricken by the imposing presence of the mistress of Castlebar. She was not only an exceptionally handsome woman, but her attire was rich and beautiful, her whole appearance suggestive of wealth and importance. Only for the moment, however, was Frances taken aback.

"Yes, Miss Kerr is at home. Will you walk in? Eleanor, here is a lady for you."

Eleanor was toasting muffins before the little gas stove in the scullery. In her amazement and haste she appeared with the toasting-fork in her hand; at sight of Mrs. Allardyce she appeared paralysed.

Frances, thinking it could only be Eleanor's mother, discreetly withdrew, heaving a slightly doleful sigh. She was beginning to enjoy the companionship of the guest she had so reluctantly admitted, and beheld the shattering of her dream with dismay.

"Well, Eleanor," said Mrs. Allardyce, cheerily, "and here I am."

"Why, why have you come?" faltered Eleanor. "Is anybody with you?" She even peered eagerly and expectantly into the dim recesses of the dark little passage.

"No, I'm my lee lane. I came for your mother's sake to see what ye are about. I'm glad to find ye so couthie-like. Will ye bid me in?"

"Surely. Frances, where are you? This is a friend from Scotland—Mrs. Allardyce, Frances Sheldon, of whom I wrote to you."

"Not your mother after all!" said Frances. "How do you do? We are just going to have tea. Eleanor is toasting the muffins. We can accommodate three at a pinch. Please walk in."

Mrs. Allardyce did so, and was accommodated with the most comfortable basket-chair in the sitting-room. Frances took her cloak, and untied her bonnet strings, and got her a footstool—talking all the while—for she felt the moment to be a little awkward for Eleanor; who had, indeed, retired to finish her muffins, and to recover from her surprise.

"You are very comfortable here," said Mrs. Allardyce. "An' very sib-like for two that never saw other a week syne."

Frances was quick enough to grasp the meaning of Mrs. Allardyce's Scotch phrasing, and nodded.

"We're getting on AI. I hope you've not come to take her away?"

"No, I have not. Only for her mother's sake, as I said, to see what she is about. But she canna bide here upon you."

"She doesn't need to. She's got a lot of money, more than I ever saw at one time, and she's going to work. It'll do her good," said Frances, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper, and pushing the sitting-room door close with her foot. "She's got a lot of silly ideas. All girls have till they get sense, and she's got more mercies than most—a mother to begin with.

She's got to live here for spell to realise them. Take my advice and let her alone."

"She will be let alone, my woman. Her father will not let them speak her name; he is a hard man in his anger, Alexander Kerr, and Eleanor vexed him sore. She is very well off to have found a friend like you."

Frances laughed, and pulled her pink linen shirt-cuff down below her shabby serge sleeve.

"Oh, I'm not bad as far as I go. I can give her the benefit of my experience, and I like her. She is a good sort, or will be when she acquires a little more common sense, and she's very clever."

"All the Kerrs are. But, tell me, what kind of work does she think to do?"

"Anything," said Frances, cheerfully. "We heard of a secretaryship this morning with an old gentleman who is interested in mummies. He makes researches at the British Museum, as they all do, and writes up at home. Eleanor is not sure about her ability to concentrate her attention on mummies, but I tell her it is possible to do anything for bread."

"You have nobody to help you, I suppose, your father being a minister?"

"Nobody, and I don't need help. I'm thankful to say I can now give it. I've no reason to complain. I have work, and I am able to do it, and at present I do not require any more."

"What age might you be?" inquired Mrs. Allardyce, true motherly interest in her face, and a very genuine approval in her honest eyes, as she regarded the slim, straight figure and the honest, frank, capable-looking face of Frances Sheldon.

"I'm twenty-seven, but I don't feel it. Here comes Eleanor with the muffins. Will you share our bachelor tea?"

"That I will," she replied, heartily, and the little meal, thanks to the wit and tact and ready tongue of Frances Sheldon, passed off merrily and without an awkward moment. When it was done she gathered up

the things, took them to the scullery, and carefully shut the door. Eleanor did not sit down. She was troubled under the kind but straight glance of her old friend's honest eyes.

"That's a very eident young woman, Eleanor," she said. "So far as a housemate is concerned, ye have fallen on your feet."

"Yes, I know I have," Eleanor replied, and leaning her head on the mantelshelf, which was laden with curious little trifles, whimsical as the many moods of the being who had arranged them.

"Tell me how mamma is," she said, presently, and with evident effort.

"I saw her on Saturday. She looked wae and worn, as well she might. You were very cruel, Eleanor, to the mother that bore you; you will only ken how cruel when you have a bairn o' yer ain about your knee."

"Frances said that too," said Eleanor, with a sharp breath, which was almost a sob. "I did not think I did anything so very dreadful, and mamma always liked Claud best."

"He is the most lovable of the two, if you ask me," replied Mrs. Allardyce, flatly. "But even if it were true, that doesna mend your fault. Ye have nearly killed your mother in her frail state. But for that I shouldna be here the day."

Mrs. Allardyce acted up to her strong sense of duty in thus laying the matter in its true light before the misguided, headstrong girl. But when she saw her cheek blanch a little and her lip tremble, her heart grew soft and kind, as was its nature.

"You surely don't mean that mamma is seriously ill, that I have made her so?" Eleanor said, pitifully.

"She is very frail; but, doubtless, she will now mend. That letter I was able to show her made a fell difference. When I go back I hope to tell her what will cheer her still mair."

"It was good of you to come; the action of a true

friend," said Eleanor, quickly. "Few would have taken a long journey in such weather on my account."

"It wasna on yours, my woman, but on your mother's," replied Mrs. Allardyce. "Ye are not speerin' for your father."

"No, I'm afraid to. I suppose he was furious?"

"He was past speech, they said, and he will not suffer your name in Haugh; but that will pass."

"Oh, yes, his fits of passion usually do," said Eleanor, rather flippantly; and though Mrs. Allardyce did not greatly respect Kerr of Haugh, she, like her son, would have wished in his daughter a different attitude towards him.

Eleanor felt her disapproval, and spoke up plainly.

"It is no use pretending that I am very fond of papa, Mrs. Allardyce. I used to be afraid of him in my childhood; now I try very hard not to despise him. You have a very charitable soul, but you cannot say that he seeks to win the respect and love even of his own children."

"I will say naething, lass, but that the Saviour set us an example we are ower ready to forget. The day will come when you will see good in your father you cannot see now, an' then there will be sorrow in your heart for these hard words, even if everything be true. I must not forget to say that Claud and Mary sent their love to you, and my son his best respects."

"Is he well?"

"Quite; thank you. I suppose I can take back word that meantime ye are content as ye can be. That you are not wi' thae ill folk is blithe knowledge for us, Eleanor."

The girl painfully coloured.

"I have been a fool where they are concerned. They are quite worthless," she admitted. "All but Adrian. But for him, Mrs. Allardyce, heaven knows where I should have been this day."

"Is he to be seen? I would like to see him. Have you an address?"

"Yes."

"Gie it to me, an' I'll ask him to come an' see me at the hotel. I'm acting for your mother, Miss Eleanor, an' she would wish me to see him, I am sure."

Eleanor wrote his name on a card and gave it to Mrs. Allardyce, who put it in her purse.

"Now, I think that is all. You are content to bide here the now, and you'll promise not to leave here without letting either your mother or me ken."

"Oh, I can promise that."

"And if you should be hard-up, or in anxiety of any kind, ye'll let me ken, too; promise that."

Eleanor's eyes filled with tears. She was quite unable to speak, and Mrs. Allardyce was pleased to see her so moved, and hope of the future revived in her breast. Just then Frances knocked lightly at the door and looked in.

"May I come in. I've washed up," she said, comically.

"But if your talk is not over, just tell me. I assure you the scullery is a very comfortable place."

"We have finished our talk, Frances," replied Eleanor, soberly. "Come in."

"But I must be going," said Mrs. Allardyce, rising from her chair. "Now, suppose you two lassies come and dine with me to-morrow night, and I'll take you to the play. I've not seen one myself since I was in London with my ain guidman in the sixties. It'll be a ploy for us."





CHAPTER XXII.

"I HOPE SUCCESS WILL BE YOURS."

ADRIAN BRABANT was surprised to receive one morning at breakfast a summons to the Langham Hotel from a lady whose name he did not know. He read it with a perplexed air, and being by nature ingenuous and communicative, passed it to his mother. When she beheld the name of Margaret Allardyce writ in the large, clear, round hand of that lady, her surprise exceeded her son's.

"She asks me to call before twelve. That is impossible, since I have to meet Rickman at ten, and he will keep me till one, or later," said Adrian. "I cannot possibly get there much before two."

"You had better wire to her, then. Rich ladies who can afford rooms in the Langham do not like appointments negligently kept," said Madame, but dropped no hint that she was familiar with the name.

"What can she want, or who can she be?" he said, musingly. "It is a most uncouth and curious name."

"A stroke of unexpected good fortune may be coming in your way," observed Madame, drily. "Take my advice and wire."

"Yes, I shall," said Adrian, as he rose up to go.

His mother waited until he was safely away from the house, then she dressed herself carefully and took an omnibus to Vere Street, walking thence to the Langham

Hotel. It was her pleasure to learn, if possible, what was the business of Mrs. Allardyce with Adrian. Madame was a woman who suffered no opportunity to slip; sometimes they turned out badly for her, but she missed none. If anything could be got out of the mistress of Castlebar, even a humble half-sovereign, Madame was the woman to obtain it. But perhaps her first motive on this particular occasion was curiosity pure and unadulterated. She was glad even of this slight diversion. Times being hard and monotonously dull, Louis had absented himself for a whole week from the humble abode off the Edgeware Road, and the excitement of Adrian's débüt as a playwright was still in the future. She arrived in the vestibule of the hotel at eleven, and on inquiring for Mrs. Allardyce, was at once taken up to that lady's private sitting-room. She was dressing to go out, having just received Adrian's telegram saying he could not call till two. She did not feel quite so surprised as she might have been at sight of Madame, but she gave her only a very cold greeting.

"Pardon, Mrs. Allardyce," began Madame, with the pretty accent she always affected when she wished to produce a specially good impression; "my son could not come; he has erred, I know, but he has begged me to convey to you his apologies. It was in case the postponed time might not suit, we thought I had better come soon and wait on your commands."

"I have no commands to give," said Mrs. Allardyce. "I only wanted to see your son to thank him in the name of my friend, Mrs. Kerr, for his kindness to her daughter."

Mrs. Allardyce had all her dignity on as she spoke these words, and she eyed her unwelcome visitor very steadily, not offering her the courtesy of a chair, nor giving her the slightest encouragement to remain. She felt her to be false and hypocritical, and she wished to have no dealings with her. But it took a good deal more than a mere assumption of dignity or hauteur to discomfit Madame Brabant.

"Ah, that unfortunate affair," she said, clasping her hands together. "Will Madam be so good as to sit down so that we may have a little talk? I am glad to have this opportunity of making things plain. I entreat you to believe that we had no hand in the flight of poor dear Eleanor from her home; we—"

"I'd rather not talk about it, ma'am," said Mrs. Allardyce, bluntly. "It's past, and can do no good. The evil's done, and I only wanted to see your son, because I hear he has truly befriended that misguided and unhappy bairn."

"But I—I also, Madam. I did what I could. I warned her; I reasoned with her as a mother might have done; I implored her to go back. She will herself tell you so."

Mrs. Allardyce made no remark. She was in a dilemma, wondering how to get rid of the woman who had thus intruded herself on her, and was quite evidently destitute of any sense of delicacy.

"It is our misfortune that we could not receive her as we wished, as the Brabants ought to be able to receive their friends. As I say, it is our misfortune, and for it we suffer. We are poor. You who are so rich as to be able to live here, commanding what you like, cannot understand the sordid conditions of such life as ours. As I say, it is our misfortune, not our fault."

"We need not go into that matter any further, ma'am," said Mrs. Allardyce. "It is no concern of mine, nor have I any interest in it."

"You have seen Eleanor, then, and she is going back with you? Perhaps she is even now here, in the other room?"

"No, she's not, nor is she going home. May I beg you to excuse me, ma'am? I have to go out now, and I have no more time to spare."

Madame rose a trifle disappointedly.

"I fear I have not made clear to you our innocence in this affair. I assure you it is true. I regret that I should have detained you so futilely, but I felt it due to

myself and my family to make this explanation to one who would at least bear my regrets to Mrs. Kerr."

"It was an ill day for Haugh when you set foot in it, Madame," said Mrs. Allardyce, exasperated into plainer speech than usual.

"Ah, well, that may be. The poor have few friends, and it is the world's way to jump on a man when he is down. You are prosperous, Mrs. Allardyce, and you look it. Also you have all the intolerance of the rich for those whom fortune has not favoured."

"There you are wrong, ma'am. I'm the very last person to judge a man or woman by the coat on his back but by the company he keeps. I can gie Mrs. Kerr your message if that will please you, and now I must bid you good-day."

Madame regarded her stedfastly a moment ere she turned to go. She was a bold woman, who shrunk at few things, but she felt that she could not ask money from the mistress of Castlebar. Yet she was sorely in need of it, and the fat purse in the lady's hand fascinated her. She was very cross as she went downstairs, and for the obsequious waiter who attended her she had no tip but a scornful glance. Had Mrs. Allardyce known the straits to which poor Madame was reduced, she would cheerfully have given her a sovereign, as she might have bestowed it on any other needy person; but now the opportunity was gone. She was going home next day, and she had some shopping to do, which she arranged, timing herself to return to the hotel for lunch at two. She found Adrian Brabant waiting for her in the hall. She was greatly struck by his appearance, and when she looked into his face her surprise increased. For there she read sincerity, honesty of purpose, integrity of soul.

"I am glad to see you, sir," she said, with great cordiality. "Will you lunch with me now? We can be quite quiet in the big room; there are not many folk in just now."

He thanked her, somewhat mystified. In this respect-



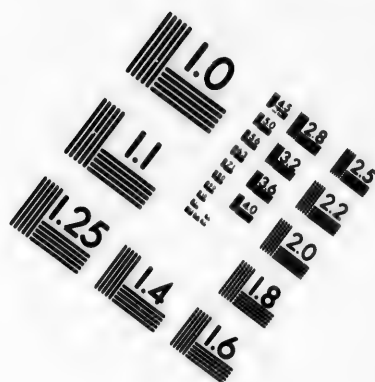
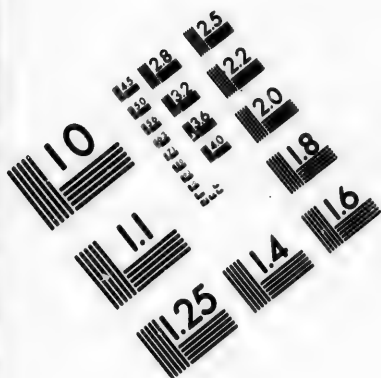
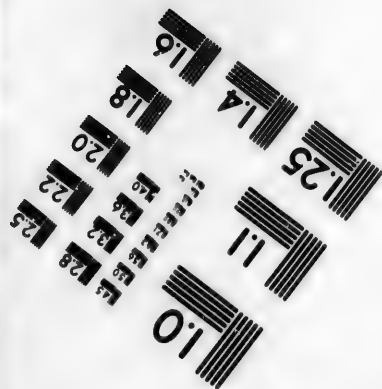
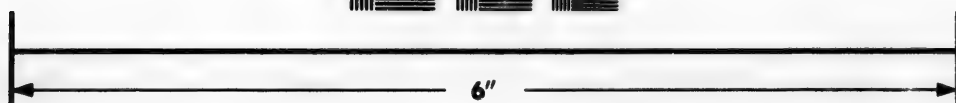
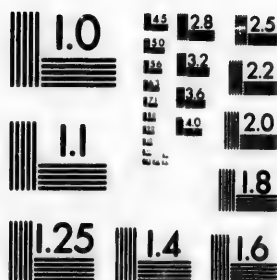


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able, substantial, middle-aged woman, who oddly combined the ways of a true lady with the appearance of a country-woman, he failed to see a person likely to be interested in him. He followed her into the lunch-room, and at one of the small tables they were quite safe from overhearing or observation.

"I've had your mother, Mr. Brabant."

"My mother!" he stammered, and his colour rose.

"Yes, she and I have met before. I'm from Scotland."

"Oh, from Scotland!" he repeated, and the whole matter appeared clear. "You are not—not Miss Kerr's mother? Of course not, how stupid! Your name is different."

"I am her mother's friend," replied Mrs. Allardyce. "And she would wish me to thank for her any that have befriended her bairn. It was for that I asked you to come. The lassie has told me of your kindness to her."

He seemed embarrassed by her thanks, and the hints as to what his mother had said or done did not tend to lessen his discomfort.

"I did nothing more than my simple duty, Madam. You have then seen Miss Kerr? She feels fairly comfortable in Barker Street?" he said, inquiringly.

"She is very comfortable, indeed. A hantle better off than she deserves to be with that true-hearted friend of yours, Miss Frances Sheldon."

Adrian looked immensely gratified, and decidedly more at ease. The waiter placed their soup on the table at that moment, and Mrs. Allardyce showed her fine quality as a hostess. It was proof of her wonderful adaptability that she appeared to feel as much at home as in her hospitable dining-room at Castlebar. Adrian Brabant, feeling quite at ease with her, and admiring her gracious, unaffected manner as much as her ruddy, well-favoured kindly face, no longer wondered at the reputation of a nation which produced such women. He thought of the sickly, sordid affectations of his own miserable life, its

trickeries and hypocrisies, and an intolerable longing entered his soul.

In a home guided by such a woman as sat opposite to him goodness was not only possible, but imperative and attractive; because in her goodness was personified. She seemed to create a healthy and clear atmosphere wherever she went.

"I've heard from the young ladies that you have written a play," she said, presently. "I only wish I could have seen it. Tell me, is there a living to be made at play-writing or play-acting; for I suppose, like the most of London folk, ye must work to live?"

"I must, indeed," he replied, not without a certain mournfulness. "I believe I am right in saying that in the dramatic profession, more than any other, extremes meet. It is either success or utter failure."

"I hope success will be yours," she said, sincerely. "For right sure am I that you deserve it. What will you drink? You do not look strong. Will you take a glass of good wine with me?"

He shook his head.

"No, thank you, Madam; I have forsworn wine; it makes havoc with a man's brains, and it is by my brains I must live."

She leaned her elbow on the white table and looked across at him, her motherly soul stirred within her in a great compassion. She did not know what most appealed to her, his frail body or his honest struggling soul. To look at them, and to know them, one would have thought these two had absolutely nothing in common, yet was there between them a subtle sympathy, born of their common humanity.

"Things are not bright with you, as I gathered from your mother," she said, trying to open the question of a need which she might help. Her heart was generous, and her purse full. Seldom had she felt so moved to empty it as to this poor, deformed, struggling man, who, against trying odds, had constantly preserved his integrity of soul.

Again Adrian Brabant blushed most painfully.

"I trust my mother did not—did not ask you for money, Madam?"

"No, my man, she did not, though had I known her to be in need, I would have given it to her cheerfully. There is a thing I must say and which you must hear, because I am old enough to be your mother, and I have a son at home."

He did not meet her gaze, and she saw a curious quiver disturb his mobile mouth.

"The cold in London is more searching than it is in our country," she said. "I have felt it myself just terrible. Will you let me, as a sma' acknowledgment of your kindness to Miss Kerr, get you a coat that will keep out that biting wind?"

He flushed again, not resenting the kindness offered in a manner so truly inoffensive, but to the proud soul kindness was at times a burden.

"I have done nothing," he responded. "Nothing even to merit your thanks."

"Shall I tell you what Eleanor herself said? 'But for Adrian Brabant, heaven knows where I should have been this day.' These were her very words, and yet you will say you have done nothing; but I like ye the better for it."

Turning from the subject then, she drew him on to talk of himself and his ambitions, and though she was an uneducated country-woman unversed in the world's ways, she was able to form a truer estimate of Adrian Brabant's character and position than many who had greater pretensions, and the thing was a revelation to her. She won his confidence so entirely that she had her way in the matter of the overcoat, and after lunch they drove to a furrier in Oxford Street, and there Margaret Allardyce spent fifteen pounds of good money more cheerfully than she had often spent as many shillings, and when she saw the frail-looking young man depart clothed in that warm, fur-lined garment, her heart glowed with gratitude to God, who had given

her not only the means but the will to lighten another's burden. It was dark when she returned to the hotel, somewhat saddened by the experience of the afternoon. As she passed into the hall a bit of unrehearsed tragedy met her, of which she often afterwards thought. On one of the lounges a fashionably-dressed man and woman were sitting together talking earnestly, when a close carriage drove up to the door, and a lady swiftly entered. When she saw the two on the lounge, she threw up her arms and uttered an exclamation of horror. Mrs. Allardyce was glad to hurry upstairs, being free from a common or vulgar curiosity which might have tempted her to stay and witness the rest of the unrehearsed act.

"I will just gie the lassies their bit ploy," she said to herself, "an' then, hame. Thank God I hae sic a hame to seek."





CHAPTER XXIII.

"HE HAS WON A PRIZE"

IT was the month of April, and the joy of spring was in the land, snowdrift and icy winds were numbered among the forgotten things of the past, and in their place green leaf and blade peeped out among the soft brown furrows, and the winds that blew were soft as a baby's smile. The sky was a wonder of loveliness and change; but mostly there was upon it a dappled glory, soft and pensive, save in the sun's track, where it flashed into a majesty of silver. The sea, faithful to all these varying moods, reflected each one, and was the delight of many. A pleasant place was Haugh in these delicious days; the lawns were emerald green, and all the borders smiled with crocus and tulip and stately daffodils. Joy and hope held court without, yet within there was little of either. The cloud cast by the flight of the daughter of the house had never lifted, and many said it was overshadowing the frail mistress to the grave. To stand within the house of Haugh on that afternoon, the 15th of April, none would have thought that next day was a great day, the marrying of the heir. Yet so it was. The renovated abode of Annfield was now in order for its mistress, and there was no reason why the marriage should be delayed. Mrs. Kerr was not confined to her

bed, though she might have been. Mrs. Allardyce often said to her son that the mistress of Haugh was "deen' on her feet," of no visible trouble apparently; only the stress of life had sapped her vitality, and she had not the heart to live. The marriage of Claud Kerr and Mary Heron was to take place in Edinburgh at the house of Mr. Aitken, the artist, who had thrown open his hospitable doors to as many as desired to come. But it was to be a quiet affair, family reasons demanding that no great fuss should be made.

Mrs. Kerr was lying down in the drawing-room that afternoon husbanding her strength for the morrow, in the hope that she would be able to go. She had no great desire to be present, yet, knowing what a sore disappointment her absence would be to Claud and Mary, she had promised. She was thinking of Eleanor—always of Eleanor—as she lay there, her heart hungering for her. Times had been somewhat hard for Eleanor, and disappointments many. Her mother naturally exaggerated these, causing herself thereby many a needless pain. Kerr himself remained obdurate, and appeared to have forgotten his daughter's very existence. He came in that day about four o'clock, as was his wont when about the place.

"I suppose Claud isn't back from Annfield yet?" he said, abruptly. "It's a fell job getting a wife. I don't mind that we made such a fuss of it, Alison."

"You've forgotten, Alec," she replied, with a gentle, far-away smile, and stretched out her hand to him with more tenderness than she usually exhibited.

He did not take it, but moved nearer to the fireplace, where he could see her better.

"Do you mean to say you're cold to-day, Alison? This room's like an oven. What is the matter with you? Ye've never been so fushionless as ye are the now."

"There isn't much, only I'm tired—tired always. Your wife's getting past her best, Alec, and we must not complain, since we've lived to see Claud with a wife of his own."

"Past your best! nonsense! How old are you?—not fifty; and look at Mrs. Allardyce, and her ten years' wear older than you," he said, aggressively.

"Ay, but she's strong. I never was, and I feel myself getting weaker every day."

"Why don't you see the doctor? Send to Edinburgh for somebody. Bring them all, if you like. I'm not minding the siller if they get you well."

She smiled faintly, and shook her head.

"Alec, won't you let me telegraph to Eleanor yet? She could travel all night, and arrive in time. It's not fair to Claud that his only sister should not be at the wedding. It should be an occasion for rejoicing and for peace."

Kerr took a turn to the window and back, with his hands clasped behind him.

"Eleanor's made her bed, Alison, and if it is not soft, I canna help it," he said, dourly. "She repaid us with very ill coin. She must learn that she canna go and come exactly as she likes."

"Will you never forgive her?"

"It is not a question of forgiveness. The lassie has been downright wicked and ungrateful. For my part, I carena if I never see her face again."

"Oh, Alec, your own little girl you used to dandle on your knee," she pleaded; but he did not melt.

"I wish we could keep them about the knees," he said, grimly.

"Then you will let me telegraph?"

"If she comes, I will not see her," he replied. "She has fairly turned me, Alison, after all that was done for her."

It did not apparently occur to Alexander Kerr that it was for a sight of Eleanor his wife was fretting herself into the grave. He did not understand women's natures or women's ways, and he could always find diversions outside from thoughts which were not pleasant to him. He had not positively resolved that Eleanor should never return to Haugh, but he did intend that she should feel

the brunt of her own folly. And he took care that his wife had no superfluous coin to find its way to London town. In all this he imagined that he did no more than his duty. So long as everybody lived peaceably at Haugh, in other words, ran to do the bidding of its master, they would find him generous and pleasant enough. But to thwart him was to put an end to all peace. Eleanor had flouted his authority and scorned his generosity, therefore she must take the consequences. So he reasoned, and marvelled that everybody did not see eye to eye with him. His wife said no more. She was not forbidden to write to Eleanor, and she wrote to her that afternoon for the second time in a week. Robert Allardyce came along from Kirkcaldy by an earlier train that day, and walked straight from the station to the old Manse. He carried his wedding gift to Mary in his pocket; he had already given to Claud a smart dog-cart built after the pattern of his own, which Claud had always admired. It was a very handsome gift; but they had been friends from childhood, and Allardyce never gave a poor thing. He carried a diamond bracelet for Mary in his breast pocket, and he wanted to give it to her with his own hand. She was busy packing up, and was quite alone in the house, Willie having taken his mother to Edinburgh in the morning, in order that Mary should have some peace to get her things together. It had been decided that Mrs. Heron should live at Annfield by Claud's express desire, though Mary had feebly protested. She could only hope that her mother would be grateful for her son-in-law's kindly thought, and would not fret and worry the life out of everybody as she had done at the old Manse. The excitement so far seemed to have done her good, and she was off to Edinburgh in high glee; full of delight at the thought of the marriage and her own importance as the mother of the bride. Then to go home to Annfield and wait there in state for the home-coming of the young pair was a consummation after her own heart. There was something odd and pathetic in the

idea of the bride being left all alone in the dismantled house to bid farewell there to her girlhood. It was hardly meet that she should be so left, but as usual she had to think of and do for others up to the last moment. Nor was the task irksome to her. She shed some natural tears as she moved about the deserted home, the furniture of which was all dismantled, ready to be taken up to Annfield for the furnishing of Mrs. Heron's own rooms.

Robert Allardyce's knock sent loud echoes resounding through the house, and gave her a great start. When she went to the door he saw that she had been crying, though she received him with a smile.

"I don't know that you ought to come in. I am all alone," she said, gaily.

"All alone, are you?" he repeated, and walking calmly in as he spoke in the privileged manner of an old friend. "And where are the others?"

"Willie took mamma over at two. I hope to be ready by six; that is if you don't stay long."

"And they have left you to clean up, and to come on behind, as usual, and you the bride of to-morrow. Mary, it is time Claud or somebody else stepped in to take care of you."

He spoke with all the candid friendliness he now felt, and he wondered that she should flush so redly under his look. He was the least vain of men, else he might long since have read Mary Heron's secret in her eyes. To-morrow she was to be Claud Kerr's wife, yet was her heart entirely in the keeping of the man who now stood before her regarding her with a simple friendliness which had in it much genuine concern for her welfare.

"I've brought my wedding present. I suppose I had better leave it, and go away," he said. Then taking the little case from his pocket—"I wanted to see Will, too—to get some hints about the function to-morrow. Perhaps you can instruct me as to the primary duties of the groomsman. I am in a state of heathen darkness about it all."

"Indeed, I can't. I think you only stand beside him and take his gloves, if he has any," she said, vaguely, her hand trembling a little as she pressed the spring of the morocco case she had taken from its white wrapping.

"Oh, Robert, this is too much; and that beautiful carriage as well. We needed nothing more—and this is too fine for me."

"Don't you like it? My mother said it looked just like you."

"Yes, I like it, but I am afraid to touch it," she said, and glancing hurriedly round the bare room, her self-control, which had borne much strain of late, gave way.

"Pray, excuse me—it is the contrast; there can be no harm in telling you now, and you won't repeat it. Do you know that often in this house we have scarcely had bread to eat, and we were reduced to one meal a day; and now to think that there is so much? Pray, forgive me. I am a silly, weak girl, but I believe you will understand."

"Do you mean to say that you have been in such straits as that?" he asked, rather sternly, and the thing was sore upon him, thinking of his own abundance; of the money for which he had so little use that it was a trouble to him seeking profitable investments for it. "Do you think it was kind to your friends?—do you think it was right to keep them in such ignorance?"

"I don't know. You have never had to eat the bread of charity; it is bitter to the taste," she replied, soberly, and he felt rebuked.

"Well, I suppose there is no use saying any more about it, though you've taken away my relish for my meat for one day at least. Will you wear my bracelet to-morrow, Mary, for auld langsyne?"

"Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Kerr have given me a necklace not unlike it. I shall be so grand. I shall be afraid of myself. I shall be thinking all the time of poor people to whom such jewels would mean a fortune, and I shall wonder whether I do right to wear them."

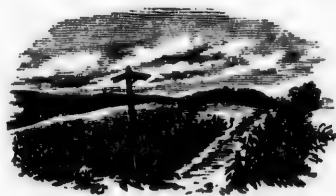
He looked at her compassionately, understanding her

as nobody, not even Claud, had yet understood her. He saw that the long fight with poverty had induced a certain morbidness which would overshadow her for a long time to come. She would not be able to enjoy the benefits of her new estate for the haunting fear that she had too much, while others had not enough. Robert Allardyce had seldom been so touched, and he showed it in his face.

"I will go away now," he said, gently. "I hope you will be very happy, Mary, and I am sure you will. Claud is a thoroughly good fellow, and he knows that he has won a prize."

"Hush, hush," she said, so peremptorily that he was surprised. He held out his hand, and when she gave him hers he kissed it.

"God bless you," he said, simply, and again he wondered at the flush upon her face. He thought of it all the way home, and on the doorsteps of his own house a sudden intuition came to him. "Idiot!" he said to himself, savagely, and put away what he deemed an unworthy thought. But it refused to go at his bidding, and it left a flush on his brow red enough to match the hue he had last seen on Mary's cheek.





CHAPTER XXIV.

"HAVEN'T YOU HAD ENOUGH OF THIS SORT OF
THING?"

MISS FRANCES SHELDON was in a brown study. It was, in her own phraseology, her off day, and she had been overhauling her little abode. That weekly duty being satisfactorily accomplished, she had washed her face, donned a clean blouse, and was sitting rather drowsily in the big basket chair, thinking not unpleasant thoughts. Times were less hard than aforetime with Miss Sheldon, and care had folded her brooding wings away from those particular chambers in Barker Street. In other words, Miss Sheldon could now pay her way, buy a few luxuries, and still have something over. Her work, the best of its kind, distinguished by a certain brightness and originality not foreign to her nature, was becoming known. Miss Sheldon was in request as a lady journalist, and now enjoyed the luxury of choice in her work. She was thinking of a letter she had received that morning from Scotland, which had filled her with a longing for the country. Summer had come upon the land in a great burst of glory, and May, even in London, was a thing to wonder over. Miss Frances Sheldon was trying to decide whether her finances would permit the immediate acceptance of the invitation which

came from Mrs. Allardyce of Castlebar. She had been nine months in London without a break of any kind, working hard all the time, and enjoying but scanty leisure. She was very strong, but she felt fagged, and the thought of the country warmed her heart. She knew it well, all its sights and sounds, its sunsets and sunrises, having lived with them in her childhood, which are often our best days, though we do not see it while they are with us. It is when the stress of life comes that we, looking back upon that time with its sublimity of trust, its abounding hope, its fulness of joy, feel our hearts fain for the days that are not. Yet we know that they will never come again, for we have eaten of the tree of knowledge which guards the outgoing porch of childhood. Blessed are they who, having so eaten, find even in the bitterness of its fruit such rich compensations as are found deep down in its core. That pleasantly-worded invitation, written heartily because it truly desired acceptance, had made work that day pleasanter than usual to Frances Sheldon. She drew it from her pocket now she had a leisure moment, and as she took it from the envelope something else fell out, hitherto unnoticed—a return ticket from Edinburgh to London. Frances Sheldon balanced it between her finger and thumb, and regarded it with a curious expression on her face. Such an act of unexpected and considerate kindness did not often come in her way, and it touched her not a little.

"There are some good Christians left in this poor old world for its redemption," she said, under her breath, and a tear dropped upon the letter written bluntly, yet in true kindness, by the mistress of Castlebar. A knock disturbed the pleasant train of Miss Sheldon's thoughts, and she went swiftly to the door. A lady and gentleman stood without, and Frances had no hesitation in recognising them, even before they asked for Eleanor.

"She isn't home yet; won't be for some time, Mr. Kerr," she said, pleasantly. "You see I recognise you. Eleanor rather expected you, if you came this way at all.

I wish you would come in and see me though she is not at home."

The invitation so frankly given was frankly accepted; Claud and Mary walked in. His tall stature seemed to dwarf the little rooms, and he looked round comically for some suitable place to sit.

"I know what you are thinking, but we don't often have such imposing personages in our abode," said Frances, with a nod and a smile. "I assure you that chair is perfectly safe though it doesn't look it. Mrs. Kerr, will you sit down here?"

She was keenly regarding them both as she spoke, and having now seen what manner of people Eleanor had left, she wondered yet more at her folly.

"So this is where Eleanor hangs out," observed Claud, critically and cheerfully. "Rather a change from Haugh, eh, Mary?"

"It is very nice, I think," replied Mary. "I shouldn't mind it myself."

She was looking well and very happy. Dress makes a difference. Mary was thoroughly well-dressed for the first time in her life, and looked years younger than in the old shabby garb. She was a great deal happier than she had expected, or perhaps, than she deserved to be. She had read a good deal about the tremendous risks of incurring a marriage without love; but Claud was so good-natured, so kind, so easily pleased, her fears had vanished. She contemplated her future with something of the pride and joy which ought to have inspired her. But these were early days; it remained to be seen how the prose of daily life would affect her.

"How is Eleanor?" Mary asked.

"She is perfectly well. She's got a little work, not much; it only brings her in about seven shillings a week, but it's a beginning. She has a good deal to do for it, but she doesn't mind hard work."

"Seven shillings a week!" cried Claud, aghast. "She can't live on that."

"She doesn't. Her money isn't quite all gone yet,

and something else will turn up. Don't look so awfully distressed. I assure you Eleanor's prospects are quite brilliant in comparison with some."

"But what will she do when her other money is all done, and she's reduced to the seven shillings?"

"Oh, we'll go on short commons. It isn't the first time I've only had a meat dinner once a week," replied Frances, cheerfully. "But I don't anticipate such hard times any more. Frances Sheldon's star is in the ascendant at present."

But Claud was horrified. To Mary, long used to hard times, seven shillings a week sure seemed a security against want.

"I'll send her a pound a week after I go back," he said to Mary. "I'll be different now I am at Annfield on my own hook."

"I don't think she'll take it. Eleanor's got some pride, and I admire her for it. She's a good deal worried about her mother. Is she rather poorly?"

"Yes, she is; she wants Eleanor to look after her. Eleanor's place is at home. Do you think you could get her to ask my father if she might come home?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't. I can do a great deal with Eleanor up to a certain point, and then she kicks. She's rather advanced for a country girl. She seems to think he has trampled on her rights."

Mary faintly smiled. Claud looked impatient.

"I thought she'd have got more sense by now. What's she got to do with rights? She was comfortable enough if she'd only humoured the governor a bit. I've got no patience with that sort of talk."

"I am afraid Eleanor would not have much patience with your sort of talk," answered Frances, promptly. "The overtures for peace will have to come from the other side."

"Then she'll have to wait a while, I doubt," observed Claud. "Does she ever see those Brabants now?"

"Only Adrian; he comes occasionally. The other one has gone back to Paris, where I hope he will remain."

London is the richer for his absence. Are you going to make some stay now?"

"No—we're going to Paris ourselves to-morrow. Can we wait here till Eleanor comes?"

"Certainly. By the by, I had an invitation to Scotland myself to-day, from that dear lady, Mrs. Allardyce."

"And are you going?" asked Mary, with interest.

"I have no alternative. She has sent me a ticket, which it would be a sin to lose. I think I shall go next week. I am feeling a little run down, though I had no hope of a holiday before the regular time; that is why I said my star was in the ascendant."

"And Eleanor will have to stay all alone. Couldn't we take her to Paris with us, Claud?"

Claud made a sorry mouth.

"Unless she's mightily improved since last I saw her, it would be rather dreich. What would you say, Miss Sheldon? Don't you think we'd better not run the risk of spoiling our honeymoon?"

"I do; besides, Eleanor wouldn't like it. There she is, I do believe."

The latch-key grated in the lock, and then the door closed. Hearing the voices, Eleanor hesitated a moment, then Mary ran out.

"It's only us, Eleanor—Claud and me. Aren't you glad to see us?"

As it happened, Eleanor was tired, disheartened, and thoroughly out of sorts. She had walked the whole way from her morning's occupation at Bayswater, the pence for the omnibus now being decidedly scarce. She gave a little gulp, keeping back her sobs manfully, and kissed her new sister with very real affection.

"Yes, of course I'm glad. How well you are looking. Where is Claud? Is Frances in?"

She marched boldly into the sitting-room, shook hands rather off-handedly with her brother, and sat down in a chair, unbuttoning her shabby gloves defiantly.

The advantage was now on Mary's side; it was Eleanor who was shabbily attired, and who looked, as

Claud expressed it, down on her luck. She was footsore and weary, and having in some way aggravated the crotchety literary lady who employed her as a secretary, she had received her dismissal.

"Don't stare at me, Claud, as if I were a natural curiosity. I'm paid off, Frances. I had the misfortune to lose my temper after writing a letter seven times, and being snubbed each time, so I'm among the unemployed once more."

She spoke defiantly and flippantly, but the tears were near her eyes. She was heartily sick of the whole business, and the prosperous, happy appearance of Claud and Mary was the figurative last thread. She could have shaken them both out of pure vexation of soul.

"Never mind," said Frances, philosophically and consolingly. "I've expected this for days. Mrs. Finch Rigaud changes her secretary as often as her rooms. Keep up your pecker, and I'll get tea."

She vanished into the scullery, and shut the doors, supposing that the trio might have some family matters to discuss.

"What is mamma's actual state?" Eleanor began, hurriedly. "She has always been writing me doleful letters, but I have only felt alarmed lately. Was she at the wedding?"

"Yes. She is not much worse than when you left," Claud answered. "She never is strong at the best of times. You don't think her any worse, do you, Mary?"

"She isn't any better," answered Mary, truthfully. "It isn't easy to say or to know exactly how she is, because she never makes a complaint."

"I say, Eleanor, how long is this sort of rot going to be carried on?" queried Claud. "Haven't you got about enough of it? You look as if you had; doesn't she, Mary?"

"She's tired, Claud—don't worry her," said Mary, wisely.

"I want to hear all about the wedding—not to be cross-questioned on my affairs, which are my own con-

cern," replied Eleanor, shortly. "How did it go off? I quite expected a letter from mamma this morning, and felt rather worried because none came."

"Oh, the wedding went all right," responded Claud, "and the Aitkens were awfully kind. Allardyce was best man, and did the thing down to the ground—didn't he, Mary? I tell you, he's a proper chap, and you oughtn't to let him wear the willow too long."

Eleanor reddened.

"It is to be hoped you can infuse a little of your own common sense into your husband, Mary. It is a quality he sadly lacks. Well, I suppose you two are going to lead a kind of ideal life at Annfield. When do you expect to get back?"

"Next week. The governor's come down handsomely, and we're going to have a jolly good time. I'll tell you what, Nell, get ready against we come back from Paris, and go down home with us. Do, like a sensible girl."

"I wish you would," said Mary. But Eleanor shook her head.

"It's easier running away than going back," she said, truthfully. "I like this free and easy life, and so long as mamma is even pretty well and doesn't send for me, I mean to stay. Does papa ever say anything about me?"

"Not much," answered Claud, drily. "Whether you come back to Haugh soon or late, you've got his pardon to beg. You can bet your boots on that."





CHAPTER XXV.

"I'M SICK OF IT."

"I HAE a visitor comin' the day, Rob, from London," said Mrs. Allardyce to her son at breakfast.

"A visitor from London!—not Eleanor?"

She shook her head.

"I'm no very blate, Rob, but I could hardly do that; but I'm hopin' it'll be a step nearer gettin' Eleanor back."

"Who is coming?"

"Miss Sheldon that lives wi' Eleanor. Did I no tell ye a' about her when I cam' back?"

"You did speak of her, but it seems queer that you should invite her here. It's not like you, mother, to ask a person you know so little about to come here."

"Maybe no; but she's comin', an' I hope you'll be kind to her, an' help the lassie to enjoy hersel', for, I tell you, she deserves it."

"All right, mother," replied Rob, readily, yet with a certain indifference. His interest in womankind had centred in Eleanor Kerr—she gone, other women failed to attract. But that she had lately come from Eleanor, and was privileged to share her home, made her interesting in his eyes. He did not expect to be at all attracted by Frances Sheldon's own personality, but sometimes the

unexpected happens. It was Saturday, market day in Kirkcaldy, and he saw many people in the town he knew.

About one o'clock Claud Kerr came in to the bank to ask him to go to lunch with him, which he did. It struck Allardyce as they walked up the street that Claud seemed a little excited. His face was redder than usual, and he spoke rapidly and almost incessantly.

"I've had a row with the governor this morning, Rob, and a jolly good one, too."

"What about?"

"Nothing much. I was speaking to George Hunter of Blair about a filly he wants to sell. I was offering him ninety guineas for her, when up comes the governor and asks me point blank, before George, who's going to pay for her. A fellow couldn't stand that, you know."

"And what did you do?"

"I told him to mind his own business, pretty sharp—George standing grinning all the time. I tell you my monkey was up, and I didn't care what I said."

"Had your father had any drink?"

"Oh yes, five or six nips, you bet; that was what was the matter with him; so we had it out there and then."

"In the street?"

"Yes, at the Exchange door—beastly, wasn't it? but I didn't seek it, and I wasn't going to be made a ninny before the whole market, was I?"

"It's a pity you didn't hold your tongue, Claud. Everybody knows your father, and nobody minds him when he's angry," said the prudent Allardyce.

"Oh, that's all very good," quoth Claud, hotly. "You don't know you're born—you were your own master even when your father was alive. I've never been able to call my soul my own, and I'm sick of it. I'm going to rebel like Eleanor."

"You've had some nips yourself, Claud, haven't you?"

"I had one good stiff glass after it. I tell you I

needed it, and I'm going to have another, too. Whisky puts spunk into a man."

"Or takes it out of him in the long run. A plate of soup will do you better. How is Mrs. Kerr?"

"Mary, you mean? She's all right, but her mother's beginning to nag already. It's a mistake for a man to live with his mother-in-law, Rob."

"Oh, you'll get on better by and by," said Robert, cheerfully, not wishing to hear Claud expatiating on his domestic affairs. "There's a young lady coming from London to-day to stay with my mother—Miss Sheldon, who lives with Eleanor."

"Oh, is she? She did say, I think, something about coming North. Do you really think, Rob, I ought to have stood by and let my father row me as he liked before everybody?"

"You could have walked away," said Robert. "Quarrelling never pays, and, as I said, everybody knows your father."

"Fetch me a glass of whisky," said Claud to the waitress, and in spite of Rob's remonstrance he drank it off neat.

These two glasses were more than enough for a man of Claud's temperament at any time, and as Allardyce observed his excitement increasing, he thought apprehensively of the consequences, and resolved to watch him the rest of the market day, and, if possible, see him safely home. He had a good deal of business of his own to attend to before the bank closed, and he left Claud at the hotel door. A few steps down the street he met George Hunter, the horsedealer of whom Claud had spoken.

"I say, Allardyce," he began confidentially, "old Kerr's in the public there as drunk as a lord, and he's vowing vengeance on Claud. You'd better get Claud to go home, or there'll be another row, as sure as fate."

"Claud has just been telling me about it. I suppose they had it pretty hot."

"They had. I was sorry for Claud, poor beggar;

it was awfully humbling to him, but it would have been better for him to shut up when he saw how things stood. Everybody knows what Haugh is when he's half screwed."

"I told Claud that, too. I hope he'll go home. You might keep an eye on him. I've a lot to do inside, but let me know if they meet. They must not be allowed to have any more words."

There were a number of farmers waiting for Allardyce in the bank, and he was kept busy for the next hour. All this time Mr. Kerr was sitting in the tap-room of an adjoining tavern, consuming unlimited quantities of whisky. It was not often he had an outbreak in the daytime, and very few had ever seen him incapable of managing himself and his affairs. When Allardyce left the bank the market was thinned, many having left to catch the west-going train. Claud was nowhere to be seen, and George Hunter had also disappeared. Someone told him where Haugh was to be found, and Allardyce entered the tavern to see what state he was in. It came as natural to him to do a kind action as to breathe, and, peaceable by nature himself, he hated to see discord between others, and often intervened to prevent it. His idea was to drive home with Mr. Kerr, and see him safely within the house of Haugh. He found him sitting half-stupefied, half-excited, and in a very talkative mood.

"Oh, that's you, Allardyce," he said, looking up with quick recognition. "Have you seen that rascal of mine? I'm not done with him yet."

"I saw him a while ago," replied Robert, carelessly, as if nothing had happened. "I came to see whether you are ready to go home, and if you'll drive me out. Are you driving?"

"Yes, the gig; I haven't got the groom, so I can take you. Sit down, Rob, and have a nip. No, I'm not done with that limb yet, as he'll see one of these fine days, when I roup him out, wife an' a'. As I telt him the day, there isna a stick or stone in Annfield that doesna belong to me, and yet he would set up to me, and offer

Blair ninety guineas o' my money for a beast dear at fifty, an' tell me to mind my ain business into the bargain."

"Don't be so hard on Claud, Mr. Kerr ; there's something to be said for him, too."

"Said for him ; no, there isn't. I'm cursed wi' ill bairns, Allardyce, an' nothing you can say will mend that fact. But they'll see that I'm master in my ain hoose ; Eleanor is learning that, starving in London for her ill temper, an' starve she may, for ocht I care, till she comes back and asks my pardon. That's the way nowadays—a man brings bairns into the world to break his ain back an' empty his pockets ; but mine shall not do that to me. I'll see them beg their bread first."

Allardyce listened in silence, knowing full well the futility of attempting to reason with a drunken man.

"I think you'd better let me go and see about the gig, Mr. Kerr ; it's getting on for three, and Mrs. Kerr will be anxious."

"Well, see about it, then," said Kerr, irritably, and Allardyce saw that his eye was glittering, and that his anger was ready to burst into fierce flame again on the slightest provocation. He went out to the bar and sent a boy to order the trap round, then went back to try and get Mr. Kerr to leave the whisky alone. But he was at the quarrelsome stage, and resented every word. He was glad to get him into the gig, and taking the reins himself, turned the horse's head westwards. The fresh air had a soporific effect on Mr. Kerr, and before they reached Seafield he was sound asleep, leaning his heavy weight against Allardyce, and presenting rather a humiliating spectacle. Allardyce branched off the main road before it turned into Kinghorn, and drove a round-about way to Haugh, which he reached about four o'clock. When they drove up to the door Mr. Kerr was still asleep, nor did he awake when the groom and Allardyce took him down and half-carried him into the smoke-room, where they laid him on the couch. Then Allardyce asked for Mrs. Kerr, thinking it better to tell

her what had happened. It was not a particularly pleasant task, but he did not shirk it. As he stood at the dining-room window admiring the well-kept grounds, he could not help thinking how little peace or comfort or happiness was found within the house of Haugh. It was as if a curse lay upon it. And it had been ever so. For generations there had been a shadow on the hearth, and peace had shunned the house of Haugh as if it were a plague-stricken spot. Katie brought the message from her mistress, presently, would he walk upstairs? He found Mrs. Kerr in a little sitting-room, where she now spent a good deal of her time, having but little heart to enter the drawing-room. She was sitting in an easy-chair, not more wan and fragile-looking than usual, and she looked more than pleased to see him.

"It is very kind of you to come and see me, Robert. We have only met once since the wedding. How well you are looking."

"I am quite well, thank you. I hope you are no worse than usual."

"Oh, no. I even think sometimes I am better. The sun puts new life into me. I have been in the greenhouse all the morning, and that has made me a little tired, that is all. Is your mother well?"

"Quite. She's expecting a visitor to-day, Mrs. Kerr. I daresay she has told you."

"I don't think she has. Who is coming?"

"The young lady who lives with Eleanor in London, Miss Frances Sheldon. She comes this evening."

"Does she?" Mrs. Kerr grew quite excited, and her face flushed. "I hope I shall see her. I must see her. She must be a splendid girl. I shall come up and see her on Monday. But you might ask your mother to bring her to church to-morrow, and to come to our pew, so that I could look on her face, and read there good news of my own bairn."

Allardyce turned away, with a lump in his throat, thinking of the many sorrows heaped upon this gentle heart, whose vitality had been crushed by them. She

looked like a pale flower whom the next blast would break on the stalk. As he thought of the inanimate object lying in the room below, his passions only lulled to sleep by the effects of the poison he had taken, his heart grew heavy within him.

"I'll tell her," he said, with an effort. "You are not asking me what brought me to Haugh at this time of day?"

"No, I thought you came to see me, and it's Saturday afternoon; you get earlier home. Had you a busy market this morning? I don't think Mr. Kerr is home yet."

"Yes, he is. I drove him."

"Oh, did you? I suppose he is at the stables. Did you see Claud?"

"Yes."

"We haven't seen anything of them since last Sunday. It's duller than ever here since Claud went; but he is very happy. I hope you're not in a hurry, Robert. We always have a knife and fork tea on Saturday at five, Mr. Kerr so often brings folks back with him from the market till Monday."

"Mrs. Kerr, I've something painful to tell you. Mr. Kerr and Claud had a few words to-day in the market, and Mr. Kerr has had too much whisky. He's asleep now in the smoke-room—I daresay he'll be all right when he wakes up. I'll wait till then, if you like."

The fleeting colour died out of Alison Kerr's sweet face, and her frail hands began to tremble nervously.

"Some words had they? Did you hear them? What was it about?"

"I didn't hear, but it was a trifling thing—something about the price of a horse. Claud was foolish to argue; but he did. I daresay there'll be no more of it, but I thought it better to tell you, so that you would understand when he awakes."

"There were no blows?" she said, faintly.

"Oh, no; just a few words. I'm sure it'll blow over."

"Once, before Claud went to Cheshire, they had a

fearful quarrel, and they were fighting in the dining-room like madmen. I shall never forget it; it nearly killed me. Those things eat out the heart, Robert. You should thank God for the peace of Castlebar. Did Claud go away home?"

"I think so. I didn't see him, anyhow. I told him how foolish it was to argue with his father when he was in that state."

"Did anybody hear them?" asked Mrs. Kerr, the sensitive colour flushing her cheek.

"Not many. George Hunter was there, I know. Don't worry about that. It'll soon be forgotten. Would you like me to stay till Mr. Kerr wakes up?"

"I don't think so. He is never very cross to me, and I'm not afraid of him. Give your mother my love, and don't mind about to-morrow. I may not be at church, but if I'm able I'll come up to Castlebar on Monday afternoon, and, perhaps, go on to Annfield after. Good-bye, and thank you, Robert; you have been a good friend to me and mine; more than a son to me."

She clasped his hand between her two frail palms, and the look she gave him sunk into his heart.

As he walked home the conviction came to him that soon Haugh would know its gentle mistress no more for ever.



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CHAPTER XXVI.

"WHERE DID YOU GET YOUR WISDOM?"

CLAUD KERR had touched no drink since his wedding-day, having given his wife a promise that he would not touch it again. In the excitement of the quarrel with his father he had forgotten that promise, which, once broken, seemed of no more value in his eyes. Allardyce imagined he had gone quietly away home after the business of the market was over; four o'clock found him still in Kirkcaldy, sitting in the hotel smoking and drinking with a few choice spirits, who deemed it a duty not to go home sober any market day. Claud Kerr had always been a favourite, having that free, frank manner and ready wit which win regard so easily where more substantial qualities fail. They spent what they were pleased to call a very jolly time together, during which Claud talked a great deal of nonsense about himself and his own affairs. The only consolation was that probably when sober they would forget the most of what had been said. About half-past four Claud mounted his horse to ride home. He was not very fit for the journey; but the animal, wiser than his master, trotted on soberly, as if he felt his responsibility. Claud did not go straight home, but turned his horse's head to-

wards Haugh, which he reached soon after five. His mother did not see him come. After Allardyce left she went down to the smoke-room, and finding her husband sleeping heavily, went back to her own room and lay down. Claud gave his horse to the groom, who saw him ride up the avenue, and was in readiness to receive it, then he went into the house. He looked into the smoke-room first, and seeing his father lying on the sofa, regarded him with an expression of dislike and disgust. Then he went to the dining-room and helped himself to more whisky from the sideboard. Katie, the housemaid, coming in to lay the cloth for tea, found him there, and saw at once what had happened. He turned and made some joke to her, then asked for his mother. Hearing that she was in her own room, he took himself up, and burst in upon her unceremoniously, giving her a great start.

"Hulloa, mater," he said, and his voice was getting a little thick. "Surprised to see me, eh? Thought I'd make a call at the half-way house. Heard from the governor of the spree we had this morning?"

"Robert brought your father home and told me," she said, starting up and regarding him anxiously.

"The deuce he did; and what for does Allardyce not mind his own business? He's too prying and meddling by half; and he wants to be told it."

"You've been drinking, Claud," said his mother, mournfully. "Oh, my boy, how could you? Think of poor Mary. It will break her heart."

"Nonsense—women's hearts are not so easily broken; besides, I've only had two or three nips, and I tell you I needed them after the row. He's an old brute, mother, and I'm going to have it out with him properly once for all."

"He is your father, Claud, and he has done a great deal for you," she said, firmly, loyal to him through all. "When I think of the way you and Eleanor have behaved, and are behaving now, I begin to think the fault must be mine; that I can't have brought you up properly."

"Oh, nonsense, it isn't your fault nor ours; we can't help ourselves. Why, doesn't even the Bible say so? you can't gather a fig from a thorn, or a grape from a thistle, or something of that sort. How could a man like the governor expect to have model kids? He isn't a model himself. I think, if you ask me, we're a jolly sight better than he could expect, and I'll tell him so to his face. We've cottoned to him too long, and it'll do him good to have a little change of face."

"You can't afford to quarrel with your father, Claud; now less than ever, that you have taken on new responsibilities."

"Oh, I'm sick of all that rot," he answered, rudely. "What can he do? He can't keep me out of Annfield; I haven't got any more than my due. I'm the only son he's got, and he can't take his gear with him. He might as well give it to me. He hasn't done any more for me than other men do for their sons; not as much. Look at Allardyce. He's been his own master since he was a little chap, while I've been bullied all my days."

"He is a better man than you, Claud, and has always been."

"He had a better father," answered Claud, sharply. "A jolly old chap, and yet he died, while our governor lives on, nothing but a cumberer of the ground. Scripture again. You see I don't forget your teaching. I'm getting quite a don at quotations."

Mrs. Kerr raised herself to a sitting posture, and drew her shawl about her as if she felt cold, though outside the April sun lay warm and sweet upon the lawn in softest benediction.

"I think you'd better come down and have some tea with me, and then go quietly home. Mary will be getting very anxious by now."

He did not demur, and they went downstairs together to make a pretence of a meal.

Mrs. Kerr made her son's tea strong, and it did something towards clearing his head, but he was not himself when he rode away. She thought, with much compas-

sion, of the young wife waiting at Annfield, and there was a peculiar pathos and yearning in her thought of her. Perhaps Mary was only taking up the cross she would soon lay down. It is a light cross some would tell us; that there are others much heavier to bear. But let these speak who have lived with those over whom this sad craving has the mastery; their knowledge is perhaps more bitter than we dream.

They will tell us that it blunts the natural affections, lowers the moral tone, saps the very springs of manhood and womanhood, blasts all it touches, withers love and hope in their bloom.

Kerr slept long and awoke sober, but sullen and morose. Unlike many other hard drinkers, he always retained a full recollection of all that had transpired while under its influence, and he vividly remembered every incident of the day. The sweet summer gloaming was stealing over the land, and casting its shadows on the room when he awoke and rose from the sofa, shaking himself together like a dog that had been in the water. He walked out into the hall, and meeting no one, stalked upstairs. Tired of her own little room, Mrs. Kerr had come down to the drawing-room, and hearing his foot on the stair, met him at the door.

"Come in, Alec, I have been wearying for you to come up. The day has seemed so long," she said to him gently, for she pitied him with all her heart.

He had held great opportunities, boundless possibilities in his hands, and he had let them all slip. He was getting to be an old man, and she did not believe that through his long life he had ever won any true regard or sincere respect. An outward court had been paid to his position and his wealth, but the higher prizes of life had passed him by, even her heart—the heart of his own wife—was cold to him, and his children only feared him because he had never taught them the meaning of love. His deserts? Well, perhaps so from a human point of view; but, thank God, we shall not be judged at the last by any human tribunal; but shall fall

into the hands of the living God, praise be to His name.

"I'd like some tea or some strong coffee, Alison. I had some bad whisky in Kirkcaldy, and it got the better of me."

His mood grew gentler as he saw the pity on her face. He let his hand fall gently on her shoulder, and looked not unkindly into her worn face.

"Ye look waefu', Alison. I'll hae an Edinburgh doctor on Monday if I'm alive."

"I'm no worse than usual, dear, only worried. Claud has been here, and—and it has vexed me," she said, with a falter in her voice. She had chosen the wrong moment for her allusion to Claud, and she saw her husband's brow grow black.

"He's a young cub, Alison. I ken not which is worse—the lass or lad. He craws gey croose since he got Annfield, and he maun be made to feel that he has earned nothing, but owes every bite he eats to me."

"Don't speak like that, Alec. What is the money or the gear for if not to give to the bairns? We can't take it with us. Let us make them happy while we are here—it will make us happier ourselves."

"It's common gratitude I want, Alison, and common civility. I have never got them either from Claud or Eleanor. Other folks have some pleasure in their bairns. I hae nane in mine."

Mrs. Kerr could think of nothing to say. It was an unprofitable line of argument, and she could not remind him that he had himself largely to blame, that he had never tried to win their respect and love.

"I'll draw in the purse-strings a bit—that'll bring him to his senses," he said, grimly. "Ring the bell, and bid Kate get me that coffee. I'll take a turn out bye till it be ready. Was Allardyce here this afternoon?"

"Yes, he brought you home."

"Oh ay, I mind. Fine chap he is. Were he my son now, it would be a pleasure to give to him or to do for him."

With which unfavourable comparison he took himself out of doors. It was a delicious, mild evening, not a breath of wind stirring. The Firth lay like a sea of glass under the sweet, soft sky ; it was as if the Sabbath peace and quiet had fallen from heaven before the dawning of the day of rest. The sweet influences of the hour and the scene were not without their soothing power over the man, and his bitter temper began to grow more kindly. He sauntered slowly on the daisied turf down to the avenue gates, and looked out into the road. It was nearly half-past eight, and the last train from Edinburgh had come in with wonderful punctuality, considering it was Saturday night. The village was very busy, but the road up to Castlebar quiet enough. On the brae he saw a conveyance coming up briskly, and, thinking he recognised the Castlebar cob, waited till it came. It was the wagonette, driven by the groom, who had some luggage beside him, and two ladies on the seat behind. Mr. Kerr was not above being interested in trivial gossip, and he was anxious to see what visitors had come to Castlebar. Mrs. Allardyce was busy pointing out Haugh to Miss Sheldon, and did not observe its master till he stepped out on the road, as they came by the gates.

"Stop, Tammas, my man, there's Mr. Kerr. How do you do, Mr. Kerr? It's a fine night," she called out, cheerily. "We're gettin' summer early the year."

The coachman drew up, and Mr. Kerr walked across to the back of the wagonette and shook hands with Mrs. Allardyce, keeping his eye all the time on the lady, whom he had never before seen.

"This is a young lady you should be interested in and pleased to see, Mr. Kerr," said Mrs. Allardyce, rather slyly. "Miss Sheldon, from London."

Kerr raised his hat and shook hands with her, puzzling himself all the while to remember where he had heard the name before. It had a certain familiar ring about it.

"Ye've had a fine day for your journey, ma'am," he remarked. "Did you leave fine weather in the south?"

"Yes, summer," said Frances, nodding. "I left something else there, Mr. Kerr, that I ought to have brought with me."

Mrs. Allardyce gasped. Nobody in the countryside dared allude, even in a roundabout manner, to Eleanor. Yet here was this audacious young person making straight for the sore point at the first opportunity.

"Ay, ma'am, what was that?"

"Eleanor," replied Frances, calmly. "But I suppose she will come down later on?"

"Humph!" said Kerr, gruffly, but not exhibiting the passion Mrs. Allardyce had feared. "Have you seen her lately, then?"

"I saw her this morning. Don't you know that I live with her?"

"I ken nothing about her, ma'am, nor do I wish to."

"Oh yes, you do; that's just put on, as Eleanor's indifference is," observed Frances, in the same calm, matter-of-fact tone, to the absolute dumfounderment of Mrs. Allardyce. "I'll write to her, I think, and tell her to come while I'm here. She wants to come very badly. I can tell you, almost as badly as you want her; but perhaps not quite."

"Humph," said Kerr, grumpily, and walked away.

Mrs. Allardyce did not know whether to laugh or to remonstrate.

"Lassie, ye arena feared. D'ye ken that no man or woman has dared say Eleanor to the man since she gaed away."

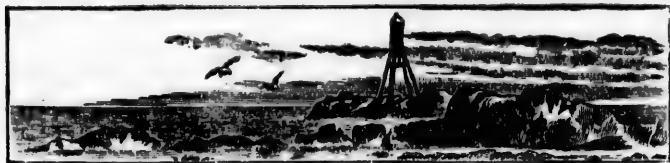
"That's what's the matter with him," observed Frances, serenely. "He isn't a very high type, but there's good in him. He wants humouring. All men do, but he more than most; a gentle persistence, and imperturbable good humour, combined with complete and stolid

disregard for his humours; believe me, that's the prescription, to be administered in liberal doses."

"Where did you get your wisdom, lassie?"

"In a hard school," observed Frances, soberly. "If I have any wisdom, I have bought it dear."





CHAPTER XXVII.

"THIS TRUTH IS REAL ENOUGH."

YOUNG Mrs. Kerr took considerable pride in her new abode. She was naturally of a housewisely nature, and had now the means to gratify her artistic taste. The combination of these two qualities resulted in Annfield becoming one of the prettiest houses in the country. Mary's taste was correct and subdued, leading her rather to quiet effects than display. She had no temptation to fantastic expression, and her sense of the fitness of things was acute. The furnishings of Annfield had been supplied by a good Edinburgh house, and were of the substantial order, inclining, perhaps, to heaviness and sombreness, which, however, Mary was able to soften and beautify. It was, indeed, a lovely home, and in it she was fairly content. I say fairly, because where absolute love is not, the estate of matrimony can never be more than fairly satisfying, and from the very closeness of its relationship full of risks. Entirely relieved from sordid anxiety of every kind, Mary had nothing to do but order her household, and extract all the pleasure possible from life. Yet so strangely and perversely are we constituted, she often looked back upon the old days with a sigh of regret. They were hard, bitter, full of anxiety, and harassing care. Yet were they less monoto-

nous than these, because there had been always the element of possibility in them. She had never known what a day might bring forth ; whereas now one day was so like another that there was nothing to distinguish them. It must not be supposed that she was actually unhappy ; nay, within certain limits she was grateful and glad over the change in her lot. Claud was the most good-natured and least exacting of husbands ; and, though he had no power to stir her heart or make her pulses beat, she felt kindly towards him, and even missed him when he was absent from the place. She thought that Saturday long, and was out several times in the course of the afternoon to watch for the familiar grey horse on the long stretch of road which lay between Annfield and Castlebar. Tired of waiting, at last she ordered tea up, and she was pouring out a second cup for her mother when she heard the beat of hoofs on the gravel. The drawing-room at Annfield was on the ground floor, running the whole width of the house from back to front, and having French windows to the lawn. She saw that the horse was covered with foam, and that Claud was very red in the face, and that he looked angry and sullen. Still she did not suspect what had happened.

"Dear me, Claud !" she said, as she opened the window and stepped out, "where have you been ? Look at poor Charlie. Why have you ridden him so hard ?"

"Do him good ; the brute's no good with laziness," he said, surlily. "I've come up from Haugh in eight minutes ; that puts him on his mettle. Where's the groom ? There's never a creature about when I want them."

Mary had never heard him speak so irritably, and the truth slowly dawned upon her, making her sick at heart.

"I'll get him," she said, shutting the window and stepping into the room, wishing she could keep her husband's state from her mother's knowledge. "Just go on

with your tea, mother. I'll be back in a minute. That's Claud, and there's nobody to take his horse."

Mrs. Heron was too comfortable to feel curious. She had the new number of the *Queen* in her hand, and a cup of tea flavoured with orange Pekoe on the table beside her, also a plate of maccaroons sufficient to content her meanwhile.

"All right," she said, indolently, and Mary closed the door.

Claud had dismounted when she got out to the porch, and she saw that he had difficulty in standing steadily. He had not come straight from Haugh, unfortunately, but had made a call at another half-way house, where the whisky was of doubtful quality, but of sufficient strength to modify the wholesome effects of Mrs. Kerr's strong tea.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, surlily. "Never seen a brute properly ridden before? Where are all the servants? I'll sack every blessed one of them if they don't hurry up. Is my dinner ready? I'm ready for it."

"You don't usually dine now. I can give you some tea if you like. Supper will be ready as usual at eight."

"Tea—no thank you! You women drink too much of the stuff. I've had some from my mother already, and it has made me feel beastly bad. Just about time you were hurrying up, Bill. Give him a good wash down, and see and be at hand next time I want you."

The groom took Charlie's bridle and walked away as if he observed nothing. Then Claud followed his wife into the house.

"Come in here till I tell you what a fine kick-up the governor and I had in the market this morning. He started to bully me before George Hunter and some of them, and I jumped on him there and then."

Mary followed him into the dining-room, and shut the door.

"Oh, Claud, you shouldn't. It would have been better to have held your tongue."

"Do you think so? I don't agree with you. He's an old brute, and it's time somebody told him so. It never pays to knuckle under to anybody."

"You're not going to take any more whisky, Claud," said Mary, starting forward as he opened the side-board door. "You've had too much already."

"You mind your own business, my woman, and don't meddle with me. I'm the master, I hope."

Mary was no coward, but there was something in his voice and in his eye which cowed her. She suffered him to fill out the glass, but before he raised it to his lips she remonstrated again.

"Don't take it, Claud, for my sake."

"I must have it, Mary. I can't do without it. I'm screwed already, and a glass more or less will do me no harm. Let me alone."

He tossed it off, and in a moment it seemed to cheer him. His eye grew brighter, and he began to talk incessantly. She stood by the sofa, with her hand on the end of it, regarding him with a very curious expression on her face. She had never seen him under the influence of drink, and shame and disgust filled her soul; and there was something else which made her heart grow heavy within her—a consciousness of the absolute repulsion she felt towards him. Love can forgive and endure much, and is not quenched even when the idol is broken. Not having such love in her heart, Mary had no room for anything but bitter condemnation. She was hard put to it, indeed, to restrain the harsh words which thronged to her lips; but it was well for her that she was able to hold her tongue. Having given her his version of the day's proceedings, he went off outside, not heeding her request that he should lie down and sleep it off.

When she went back to the drawing-room, she was so very white and miserable-looking that her mother noticed it.

"What is it, Mary? Don't you feel well? Have a cup of this delicious tea. I'm positively insatiable over it after yon abominable eighteenpenny brew we were en-

tertained to at the old Manse. I was always telling you it was poor economy to buy cheap things, but you would not believe me."

"There are times when it is cheap or go without," said Mary, so dully that her mother looked at her again in rather a startled way.

"Why, you are not well, Mary. What is it?"

"I am well enough. I suppose I may as well tell you, as you'll see it for yourself. Claud has come home from the market the worse of drink, and he says he's had a quarrel with his father."

"Oh!"

It was not a very cheering announcement, and Mrs. Heron felt concerned for the moment.

"I'm sorry to hear about the quarrel, but they'll patch it up again. Claud can't keep up spite. Don't worry over it."

"I'm not worrying over the quarrel, though it's not a pleasant thing to hear about. It's the drink. I'm terrified for it, mother, positively terrified, and it is quite dangerous for Claud even to touch it."

"Oh, don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill. What's a glass at the market? Most men have one there if nowhere else. I never saw such a girl as you, Mary. If you don't have real troubles, you make them for yourself."

"I hope not, mother. This one is real enough. I don't want Claud to become like his father. That's where the danger lies."

"My dear, Claud is quite a different man. He hasn't a hot temper, but is easy-going and kind. Even if he did take an occasional glass, I don't see that you need be alarmed," said Mrs. Heron, doing her best out of her limited wisdom to comfort her daughter. She was so contented and upheld by the present solid comfort of her surroundings that she could not see any trouble ahead. Not finding much solace in these counsels, Mary held her peace, and changed the subject.

About six o'clock Robert Allardyce rode up to Ann-

field after having had tea with his mother and talked the thing over. He felt desirous to know whether Claud had got home safely. He would not go into the house, but only dismounted when Mary came out to him. She was able to meet him now entirely without embarrassment, but he did not come very often to Annfield. He gathered from her face, which wore a troubled look, that all was not as well as usual.

"Is Claud home?" he asked, as he raised his hat and shook hands with her. "I only want to see him for a moment."

"Yes, he is home; about the stables, I fancy. I have not seen him for an hour or so. Were you at the market to-day, Robert?"

"I was in Kirkcaldy as usual. I heard that Claud and Mr. Kerr had words, but don't worry about it, Mrs. Kerr. It will be all right next time they meet."

"Do you think so?"

She spoke rather hesitatingly, and there was a vague apprehension in her eyes. She longed to speak out her whole trouble to this man, who was so sympathetic and helpful always, but a certain loyalty to her husband deterred her.

"Is your mother well?" he asked. "No, thank you, I won't come in. I may see Claud as I go down, and if not it doesn't matter."

She looked up at him with a quick penetrating glance.

"You know he was— You came to see if he had come home all right," she said, impulsively.

"Well maybe I did, and what for no?" he said with his pleasant smile. "Claud and I were not laddies together for nothing, and I would see peace—peace and happiness in Annfield."

Her eyes filled, and she was for the moment unable to speak. She looked very slight and slim and fragile as she stood there within the porch, with her white hand on the stone column that supported it, the soft folds of her black silk gown sweeping at her feet.

"We've company coming to-night to Castlebar," he

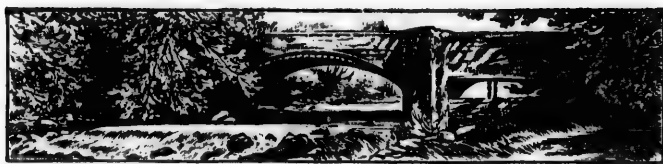
said, anxious to change the subject, for her tears troubled him. "I suppose you've heard that Miss Sheldon, from London, is coming to be my mother's guest for ten days."

"Is she?" inquired Mary, much surprised. "No, I have not heard. You must bring her up to Annfield. I liked her, Robert; a sensible, pleasant, lovable girl."

"So my mother says. I daresay they'll be up. Well, I'll not keep you, and I'll just look into the steading as I go down. Good-bye, Mrs. Kerr, don't worry. Everything will come right."

He gave her hand a right good grip, and sprang to the saddle. Mary did not watch him ride away, but as she stepped within the house the ring of the hoofs pursued her. And her one thought, God help her, was of the blessedness which would descend upon the woman who might one day call Robert Allardyce husband.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I'M GOING TO BE MY OWN MASTER NOW."

CLAUD had a headache on Sunday morning after the Saturday market, and did not go to church. Mary drove down alone. Nobody was in the Haugh pew except Mr. Kerr, who greeted her as usual. He was very angry with Claud, but he was just, and would not visit his offence on an innocent head.

Mary felt rather relieved by the ordinary manner he exhibited, and hoped the affair had been less serious than she had been thinking. The smile and the cordial handshake enabled her to enjoy the service.

"Mrs. Kerr is not out?" she observed, as her father-in-law carefully put the books in the box after the benediction. "I hope she isn't any worse?"

"Oh, no; I don't think so. You'd better come up and see her."

"I will, if you think I ought; but we expect her at Annfield to-morrow. The Allardyces are coming to dine."

"She winna be," said Mr. Kerr, brusquely. "Are you ready?"

He gave her her umbrella, and held open the pew door for her to pass out.

Mary walked up the aisle feeling that all was not

right. She was looking very well in a new spring jacket of fawn cloth and a dainty bonnet with a coronet of violets—both of which had come from Paris, and were greatly admired in the Kinghorn kirk. Mrs. Claud Kerr was like to set the fashion now Eleanor was gone for good.

They walked together up the brae rather silently, Mary too timid to speak. She saw a kind of lowering of the brows on Mr. Kerr's face, and a rather firm set of the clean-shaven jaw, which indicated stormy weather. She wanted very much to allude to the incident of yesterday, but hard'y dared.

"Ye'd better come up," said Mr. Kerr, as they came within sight of the traps. "Send Peter home, and I'll make Wilson or Andrew Kidd drive you home after dinner."

"They will expect me home," she said, hesitatingly.

"Never mind ; it'll do them good to wait," he said, peremptorily. "Here, Peter ; go home and tell them your mistress is at Haugh, and will be up by and by."

Peter touched his hat and ran off. Mr. Kerr helped his son's wife into the wagonette and got in himself, and James Wilson, the old coachman, was driving, and as he was rather deaf they could talk freely. Mr. Kerr did not, however, appear to have much to say.

"Ye are lookin' very smart, Mrs. Claud," he observed, at length, struck by the winsomeness of the face beneath the violet bonnet. "A new rig-out?"

"Not exactly. I bought them in Paris, but it is only now they are seasonable," said Mary, with a little blush—pleased with his approval.

"Well, you look uncommonly well. Fine feathers help, and you deserve them," he said, kindly, for she was a great favourite of his, and it had pleased him well when Claud took her to wife.

Emboldened by this kindness of manner and tone, Mary looked at him rather wistfully.

"Mr. Kerr, I am very sorry for what happened yesterday. I hope you will not be very angry with Claud."

Mr. Kerr looked straight before him, and his mouth grew very stern.

"I am angry, an' justly so. My bairns are a curse to me, and not a blessing. They are nothing but a heart-break."

"Oh, don't say that," cried Mary, in distress, for his harsh tone and words hurt her. "I am sure Claud tries to be dutiful, and we are both grateful for all you have done for us. He was not quite himself yesterday when it happened; don't keep it up against him."

"It's not a question of keeping up. I only want common civility, as I said, and common gratitude. There's something wrong somewhere, in their upbringing or somewhere. Ye ken what Eleanor has done; and as for Claud, where would he have been but for me? He had no brains; he would never have gotten past the plough handles, you can take my word for that."

It was not particularly pleasant hearing for a wife, but she bore it in silence.

"Neither o' them hae ever earned a penny in their lives, and they dinna ken what it costs to earn it, and when I heard my lord telling Blair that he would give this, that, and the other for a beast not worth tippence, it was more than I could bear. I like you, my woman, and I'm vexed for you; but I'm done with Claud till he comes and begs my pardon for what he said in Kirkcaldy Market, and promises to do better in the future. He can hing as he grows for a while, and try his hand at makin' a livin' aff the place."

Mary turned away her head, and her mouth trembled. She had left Claud at home in a sulky and dour mood, and listening to Mr. Kerr, the breach appeared to her to widen. Not knowing what to say, she held her peace.

"Have you seen this young woman they've gotten at Castlebar?" was his next unexpected question.

"Miss Sheldon? I saw her in London, of course, when Claud and I were there. I just caught a glimpse of them this morning as they went up to church. Have you seen her?"

"Last night as they drove up from the station ; a very plain-spoken person she seemed to be. It's a queer thing for Mrs. Allardyce to be inviting such orra folk to Castlebar. Nae good ever comes o't, as I have dearly proved. What's Willie about lately ? We seem to hear and see nothing o' him."

"He is talking of going to London, too, and Mr. Aitken seems to think it might be a good thing. But it seems a pity that London should swallow up so much."

"I think so, too. It's an ill place, an' it's only the ne'er-do-weel that like it," observed Mr. Kerr, sourly. "Well, we're going to have a fine dry summer, I think, after the long frost. I never saw Haugh lookin' better."

"The fields are lovely at Annfield, too. Claud says we'll have a splendid crop," said Mary, bravely.

"Humph !" was all Mr. Kerr's comment, and they drove through the gates and up the avenue in silence.

Early dinner was served at Haugh on Sunday, and Mrs. Kerr was in the dining-room when the carriage drove up. She went to the door, well pleased to see Mary, and kissed her warmly.

"I'm so glad to see you ; but where's Claud ? I wish he had come."

"He is out of sorts rather this morning, and I don't know what he will say to me for deserting him like this, but I wanted to see you very badly."

"And I you, dear. Come up and take off your things. We have ten minutes before the gong goes."

She took Mary up to her own room, and sat down breathless with the exertion of mounting the stairs.

"Oh, my dear, isn't this a pity about Claud and his father ? It seems ordained that I am never to see peace in Haugh while I live."

"Yes, it's a pity about the quarrel ; but the greatest pity of all is that Claud should have had too much drink," said Mary, in a low voice. "I got some idea last night of what you have had to bear so often and so long."

"Was he very bad?" inquired Mrs. Kerr, bending forward in painful eagerness. "He was almost sober when he left here."

"What time was that?"

"Soon after five."

"Well, he was home about six, but he must have had something more on the way up, because he was certainly not sober. What a curse it is!"

"And what like is he this morning?"

"Oh, just what you would expect—a bad headache, and very cross. Do you think they'll make it up? Have they ever quarrelled as badly before?"

"Not since before Claud went to Cheshire. They had a frightful quarrel just then, and it was the cause of his leaving home. You must try, dear, to make Claud conciliate his father. He can't afford to quarrel with him."

"No, and he ought not to do it," said Mary, who had not that strong wifely love which will seek to cover up every fault. "I shall certainly speak very plainly to him when I get home. I have never said anything yet."

"Do it judiciously, dear, and gently," said Mrs. Kerr, warningly.

"Do you think it is wise or right to be gentle always?" asked Mary, suddenly. "Are there not times when it is necessary to be firm and plain-spoken?"

"Maybe, but the Kerrs are ill to deal with, Mary. I told you that before you took Claud, but he is so fond of you, he will heed what you say."

Mary did not look very hopeful, nor did she feel it. They were not a particularly lively party at dinner, and Mary did not linger after it was over. Mr. Kerr himself drove her in the gig up to the lodge at Annfield.

"You will never set me down here, Mr. Kerr?" she said, when he stopped, even after the gate was opened, and made no sign of going through.

"Yes, lass—ye can walk that step, surely."

"Oh, it isn't that. Do come up and have tea with us—and see Claud. I'm sure you'll find him sorry if he was rude to you."

Mr. Kerr set his lips.

"It's his part to seek me, and I'm not coming up. If he wants me, he kens were to find me."

"Do come up."

She stood by the gig step, her small hand on the splash-board, her winsome face uplifted wistfully to the stern one above her. It did not relax, though he was inwardly moved by her appeal.

"No, I'm not coming. If he wants me, as I said, he knows where to find me, and it's his place to seek me."

He bent down, shook her hand cordially, and turning Prince's head, drove away. Mary watched him for a moment or two, and then passed through the gates. When home she felt rather weary of it all, and there was a good deal of bitterness in her soul. She had gotten wealth, position, freedom from sordid care, but she had paid for it, and she wondered whether the present anxiety were not as corroding and as bitter as the old. Being cross and out of sorts, Claud resented her absence at dinner-time, and poor Mrs. Heron had been sore put to it to know what to do with him. The uncomfortable meal had passed almost in silence, and now Claud was sitting moodily in the little smoke-room which adjoined the hall. But he was too sick and sorry to enjoy his pipe, which he had thrown from him in disgust. Mary looked into the little den, as a matter of course, expecting to find him there.

"Well, have you got back?" he said, ungraciously. "You've gotten mighty fond of Haugh all of a sudden. I hope they were civil to you?"

"They were very kind," she answered, quietly. "Your father drove me home."

"Very condescending of him; and did he enliven your drive with abuse of me?"

Mary regarded him rather sadly and quietly for a moment. Had she loved him she had, as a matter of

course, taken the right way with him ; but seeing him as he was the previous night had given her a feeling of aversion to him, which there is no doubt he instinctively felt.

"You'll need to apologise to your father, Claud," she said, in a hard, even voice.

"I'll be damned first," he answered, promptly and angrily.

"Pray don't swear," she said, coldly. "It does not improve the situation at all, nor raise you in my estimation."

"They've talked you over," he said, rather sneeringly. "And you're as good as telling me I'm a blackguard. A good wife stands up for her husband. By Jove! I'd stand up for you to every man of them. But I suppose it's the loaves and fishes you're afraid of, like the rest of womankind. Can't I work for you?"

Mary made no reply. His tone and manner made her feel cold and sick at heart. This was the side of Claud's character she had heard of, but never seen.

"I've got Annfield in my hand, and I can snap my fingers at him. My name, or his, is good for any amount of credit, so he'll get time to cool down. It was just about time I asserted myself. He forgets that I'm a man now. By jingo! Eleanor was not so far out after all, and she had more pluck than me."

Mary felt an unusual sense of irritation and impatience as she listened to these defiant words.

"There is no good to be got talking like that," she said, quite coldly still. "And if you talked so to your father yesterday, I don't wonder he was angry with you."

"So you've gone over to the enemy at the first round of the guns?" he said, rising. "All right, you can stop there. I'm sure I don't care a rap."

It was not pleasant or profitable talk between husband and wife, and Mary keenly felt it ; but for the life of her she could not make herself appear amiable when she did not feel so.

She turned away disappointedly, but made a great effort as she stood within the open door.

"Don't be so cross, Claud. Wait here till I get my things off—then we can have a good, sensible talk over it."

He heard her, not ill-pleased, but the dourness of the drink was upon him, and the sting of her former words remained.

"I can't talk to please you, it seems, and I don't want any more telling me what I ought to do. I know my own mind, and I'm going to be my own master now, in spite of you and the governor too."

Mary turned on her heel, and went off upstairs, and two tears, very bitter, trembled on her lashes as she shut the door of her own room and turned the key.





CHAPTER XXIX.

"SHE HAS WON A GREAT DEAL OF AFFECTION
ALREADY."

FRANCES SHELDON was distinctly curious about Robert Allardyce, chiefly on Eleanor's account. Not that Eleanor had given her much satisfaction; but Frances was a very shrewd person, given to arriving at quick conclusions, generally correct. She gathered that there had been some love passages between Allardyce and Eleanor, and believed that Eleanor was not now indifferent to him. She came down with many philanthropic ideas floating before her mental vision, beholding in the near future, through her auspices, a reconciliation between Eleanor and her parents, and a possible wedding which would prove acceptable to all concerned. Before she had been many days at Castlebar her views became somewhat modified, and her philanthropic desire stopped short at a certain limit. The process was gradual, and instructive to herself, and to some others who looked on. The first evening Robert and she had very little to say to each other. Though quite unconscious of it, her manner was so extremely cold and distant that it froze him into silence, whereas she only felt a curious diffidence and shyness—as distressing as

it was novel to her. No man had yet had the power to trouble the calm waters of Miss Sheldon's existence. As for love, while not denying its existence, she regarded it from the standpoint of an audience who are pleased to be amused or edified by witnessing a play which they know to be unreal, but simulated for their delectation. This attitude had engendered in her a gentle raillery towards all themes pertaining to love, which caused those who knew her to fear her criticisms. Allardyce's manner to women was characterised by a deferential and protecting kindness, which had for most women a singular charm. It was born of his peculiarly happy relations with his own mother, the bond between them being specially warm and close. They understood each other so perfectly, and were so united in interests, that they were almost ideally happy. It was always a happy atmosphere to come to, and invitations to Castlebar were highly prized. Mrs. Allardyce only asked to her house such as she really liked and esteemed, and when they came she bestowed upon them a hospitality so gracious and so generous, yet withal so unostentatious and simple, that the days seemed too short. It was to be expected that between a frank, sound, honest nature like hers, and a wholesome, bright, unaffected girl like Frances Sheldon, there should be some affinity. Each felt at home with the other. It was as genuine a pleasure for Mrs. Allardyce to have the girl as it was for her to come. She felt rather disappointed that Robert and Frances should, as she expressed, "forgather so purily;" and after Frances had gone upstairs, she anxiously questioned him. Any guest unwelcome to him could not long be a source of pleasure to her.

"Ye dínna like the lassie, Robin. Is it because she has the spunk to earn her ain livin'?" she said, in rather a nettled voice.

"Did I say I didn't like her, mother?" he asked, in that imperturbable way of his, and letting the smoke curl up from his pipe in placid enjoyment.

"Ye had very little to say to her; that's what way."

"Well, I can't help that. I daresay we'll thaw tomorrow. She is a little different from the girls of my acquaintance, you know, and I must get my bearings with her before I say much."

"What do you think of her looks?"

"Oh, she's good-looking, there can be no question about that, and there's a self-reliance about her which is rather refreshing. She could make a fellow sit up, I should think."

"But she has a soft side, lad," said his mother, eagerly. "You should hear her speak of her mother."

Robert took two or three draws in silence, and then he spoke out the thought that was in his mind, believing it better that there should be no misunderstanding between them.

"Mother, I hope you have no designs on me so far as Miss Sheldon is concerned? I don't want to marry. I'm quite content as I am, and it only makes mischief when you begin to match-make."

She met his half-laughing, half-serious look with a perfect frankness which entirely reassured him.

"No, lad, I had nae sic thocht in my heid, I tell ye plain. I aince took up the stick to break my ain back before, and I was very glad to lay it doon. I only asked the lassie because her brave effort to make a way for herself an' help her folk touched me, and I would do her a little kindness if I could. I thocht my son would help me wi'd, that was a'."

"So he will," he replied, quietly, yet with emphasis which pleased her. "I'm glad we've had this crack, mother, it makes things plainer; and now off you go to bed; it's after eleven. I say, mother, I think there's likely to be some trouble between Haugh and Annfield; Claud was as drunk as a lord this afternoon—sleeping it off in the stable-loft when I was up. If he begins that little game it'll be a bad day for them all."

"Mary will save him," said Mrs. Allardyce, quietly. "She has more spirit in her than Haugh's wife. She won't stand that sort of thing, my boy."

Allardyce was silent a moment, with his eyes down-dropped. He could not speak the thought that was in his mind, though he felt that it was not a mistaken one. Alexander Kerr had taken home to Haugh a wife whose heart had never been his, and no blessing had followed him. In his inmost heart Allardyce knew that the same blight lay upon Annfield, and the thought was bitter to him, because of the love he bore to his friend. Yet was his conscience not troubled, because never by word or look or deed had he led Mary Heron to think that he had other than a friendly interest in her. Allardyce had a very wholesome nature, free from everything morbid, and he cherished in his deep heart an unassailable trust in the God his father had taught him to revere and to serve, yet at times the complex mystery of life, its many contradictions and anomalies, perplexed and troubled him. He sat long after his mother went upstairs, and when he got to his own room he read a portion from the Bible and knelt down, as was his wont, before he went to bed. And the burden of his prayer that night was that a blessing and not a curse might rest on the home of which Mary Heron was the mistress.

Next morning the little party from Castlebar drove to church. The day was lovely, one of May's choicest gifts to earth; sea and sky radiant, yet touched by a pensive softness indescribable and exquisite. Frances Sheldon had very little to say as they drove, though her eyes were wide to look at everything. The sweet influences of that country Sabbath day were laying their hush upon her spirit. She was entirely happy and content, but felt no desire to speak.

"I think I'll walk home, mother," said Robert, when they came out of church. "Perhaps Miss Sheldon would do me the honour?"

"Oh, I should like to walk above anything."

"I thought you looked as if you wanted to; it is not so very far, and being so dry, all the short cuts are available."

"Off you go, then, and if I come up on ye on the road

maybe I can gie ye a lift," Mrs. Allardyce said, not ill-pleased. She watched the two figures as they went up the brae, and she thought them, as did some others who observed them, a goodly pair. But she had no planning in her mind regarding them, nor any hopes, being now content to bide her son's time for his marrying, and not disposed to worry him concerning the matter, which showed her to be a wise woman.

Frances Sheldon felt no embarrassment in the company of Robert Allardyce, neither did she feel any particular happiness or interest. She was in reality a trifle disappointed in him, the adjective she had inwardly applied to him being "tame."

"I suppose you know Eleanor Kerr very well?" she said, quite abruptly. "I think of her a good deal here, of course; the place seems full of her, and that is Haugh before us, is it not?"

"Yes, that is Haugh. Of course I know her very well. We have known each other all our lives," he replied.

"I can't understand why she should have revolted as she has done. I should think any one could be happy here, especially in such favoured circumstances as you are placed in. I could not listen to the sermon to-day for drawing contrasts."

"Between?"

"Between your lot and some phases of life I have seen—some I have experienced. Of course, one's environment is everything; at least," she added, correcting herself, "it's a good deal. Don't you think so?"

"Do you mean that it leaves its impress on character? I should say decidedly so."

"Yes, I mean that. Now, your mother looks just like Castlebar. She is part of its substantial prosperity, its gracious and beautiful kindness, and you are not unlike it yourself. There is such large leisure here, so much room. One can breathe, and grow large, open, generous, and strong, as the poet says."

"Do you think you could live here?" inquired Allardyce, with interest.

"My experience has made life possible to me anywhere, provided I have personal liberty," she replied, calmly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I can be very comfortable if I have nobody to bully me. Mind you, I have a good deal of sympathy with Eleanor now. I have seen her paternal parent, but nothing will ever expiate her cruelty to her mother. Mothers are too precious to be tampered with. Do you think if I went to Haugh I should be allowed to see Mrs. Kerr? I will see her, even if I have to effect a burglarious entrance."

"There will be no necessity to take such violent measures. I believe I heard my mother say Mrs. Kerr was coming to see you to-morrow; and if not we will drive you down to Haugh."

"Perhaps I'll walk myself. I need to feel that I can do just as I like. You see I do just as I please in London, without let or hindrance from anybody."

She threw a smiling glance at him, wondering whether she was earning his disapproval, and not greatly caring. Yet was there something in the man's face that interested her—a direct and simple manliness which had no false note in it.

"Did you leave Miss Kerr quite well?" he asked presently.

"Oh, quite; she came to see me off yesterday. Her heart was in her mouth. I don't think it is any breach of confidence to tell you so. I should have marvelled to see her otherwise."

"You think she would like to come back, then?"

"I do; and she is waiting to be asked."

"By her father?"

"I suppose so—since he is the arbiter of destiny in his own household."

Allardyce shook his head.

"I fear she will wait some time. Besides, Mr. Kerr

was a generous father to her, he grudged her nothing. Perhaps he was arbitrary, as you say ; but so far as she was concerned, not unjustly so. Did you know these people who were the cause of all this trouble ? "

"Oh, yes. I knew them very well. I also was at school at Madame Fourmin's—a generous godmother defraying my expenses. And I know the Rickmans very well. My mother was Mr. Rickman's sister."

"I would like to hear what you think of the Brabants, if I may be so bold," said Robert. "I am curious to learn whether our provincial judgment is entirely at fault."

"It isn't ; it is correct in this instance. The Brabants are adventurers, pure and simple, except Adrian, who is a perpetual wonder to me. We are told we cannot gather grapes from thorns, but this is an exception—Adrian Brabant is one of the purest and most honourable souls I have ever met."

"My mother thought highly of him too. Does Eleanor ever see them ? "

"Only Adrian, who comes to see us at rare intervals, but too often, I can see, for his own peace," she replied, and her face grew soft and gentle in its tone.

"Why ? " asked Allardyce, involuntarily, though reproaching himself for his own unusual curiosity.

"Why, there is only one reason. He loves Eleanor as his own soul, and there is no hope for him."

"None at all ? "

"Absolutely none."

She turned her head, and looked at him straightly, and her eyes asked whether it was a vital matter to him. He did not flinch under her look.

"She has won a great deal of true affection already," he replied, quietly. "Let us hope she will not in the end choose dross instead of gold."

A faint smile touched Frances Sheldon's lips, and a strange sense of sweetness stole into her heart. Whatever the past may have held, Robert Allardyce no longer cared in that way for Eleanor Kerr ; and though the

fact shattered one of the dreams she had cherished before she came, it gave her an odd sense of relief and satisfaction, a feeling she did not care to analyse any further. As for Allardyce, the sun seemed to shine more brightly, and life suddenly became radiant with possibility, with sweet interest, and boundless hope.



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CHAPTER XXX.

"A GOOD DINNER TWICE A WEEK."

NEXT morning, of her own choice, and not deterred by Mrs. Allardyce, Frances Sheldon walked across the fields to Haugh. That walk through the green hedgerows, by fields springing in the sun, the lark carolling overhead, infused into the girl's soul a sense of rare joy. She had been reared in a country home, and all the sights and sounds of country life were dear to her. She was glad of the solitude of her walk, to revel in the exhilaration such renewal brought. She walked leisurely, taking notes all the way. More than once she stopped and peered into the hedges in search of the nests which were building, but she found none completed. Before her stretched the sea; blue, living, and lovely, tossing in the gentle wind till there were little foam-flakes here and there like snow-birds on the crest of the waves. She arrived at Haugh about noon, and Mrs. Kerr, at that hour at her best, was downstairs about her household duties. Miss Sheldon was only kept waiting long enough for her to take an inventory of the spacious drawing-room and its handsome equipments, and when she thought of Eleanor's present quarters she smiled queerly. She was standing in the long window with her

hands in her jacket pockets—a tall, straight, and purposeful figure—when Mrs. Kerr entered.

Frances immediately wheeled round. "I am Frances Sheldon. I wanted so very much to see Eleanor's mother."

Mrs. Kerr came forward a little nervously, holding out both hands. She looked very frail, and her sweet expression went home to the girl's warm heart.

"I am glad to see you, my dear; sit down," said Mrs. Kerr. "I was coming to Castlebar this afternoon. Did they not tell you?"

"Yes, but I thought something might happen to prevent you, and that you would want the latest news of Eleanor. Don't you?"

"Indeed I do. How strange to think you saw her only the other day. How is she?"

She spoke eagerly, and her eyes were wistful. Frances felt a lump in her throat.

"She is quite well, and looking so. She saw me off on Saturday morning," replied Frances, and sitting down leaned her elbows on her knees, put her chin in her hands, and looked across at Mrs. Kerr very earnestly. She had never seen her before, and to Frances she looked like a woman not long for this world.

"Mrs. Kerr, Eleanor must be got home. She wants to come; you need her here; she shall come," she said, in her most decisive tone.

Mrs. Kerr shook her head.

"She has hurt and estranged her father very much. He was very generous to her. She treated him badly, and he is taking a long time to get over it. He will scarcely suffer me even yet to mention her name."

"Eleanor must not mind him. She must come, and all will be right," said Frances, hopefully.

Mrs. Kerr leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. The little flush brought by the excitement of meeting Frances now died away, and she was left very pale.

"Tell me something about her. Tell me everything.

Eleanor does not tell me much in her letters. Don't keep anything back. I am her mother, and the smallest item is interesting, nay, precious to me."

Frances, under pretence of putting back her veil, brushed away a bitter tear. Her heart was hot against Eleanor; she could scarcely command her voice. "There is not much to tell; certainly, there is nothing that need be kept back," she said, at length. "Eleanor has had her struggle, as we all have who essay independent existence in London. When she comes back she will be a better girl, I can promise you that."

"But you are very vague, Miss Sheldon. I want to hear how she is; what she eats, what she wears, how her days are spent," said Mrs. Kerr, feverishly. "It is the lack of these details that has tried me so sorely."

"She eats well and sleeps well, and her clothes are not worn out yet," said Frances, cheerfully. "She has learned to be content with a plain breakfast and a plain tea. We share and share alike. When times are hard, we fast together."

"Fast! Do you mean to say you have not always enough to eat?" exclaimed Mrs. Kerr.

Frances observed that she must be extremely careful in her statements, and gloss over the hardships of Eleanor's existence.

"Well, I'm speaking in a kind of general way, you know; we can't have roast beef every day, but we always have as much as we can eat, and I assure you Eleanor thrives on it. She looks lovely. It's her work that worries her. She has a soul above it. You see, reared in the lap of luxury like this," she said, with a comprehensive wave, "it's jolly hard lines on her being sat on by the people who employ her. She's had five situations since she came to London—and lost them all through her own fault; but it'll do her good."

"I am not astonished to hear she does not keep her situations," said Mrs. Kerr, with a sigh. "She has had no training for such a life. The wonder is she remained so long."

"She has me, and in London I am a good deal," observed Frances, philosophically. "You see, I've got some common sense knocked into me during the last seven years, and I'm not afraid to talk to her. Besides, I like her very much."

"You think she has in her the making of a good woman when this rebellious time is past?"

"Indeed, I do. When she comes back to you, Mrs. Kerr, she will not be the same girl."

"I sometimes fear I shall not live to see that day," said Mrs. Kerr, with a slight sad smile.

"Oh, yes, you will. Eleanor is coming soon—I feel sure she is."

"You will enjoy Castlebar. Is not Mrs. Allardyce a dear good woman?"

"She is. I should think she comes as near being the ideal woman as is possible in this world," said Frances, sincerely. "And I never saw anything more exquisite than the relations between her and her son. It was worth while coming all the way to Scotland for that alone."

"He is a fine fellow—and Eleanor might have been his wife," said Mrs. Kerr, with regret in her voice.

"He did ask her, then?"

Mrs. Kerr nodded.

"And she would have taken that wretched Brabant instead! Well, well, it does not say much for the clear-sightedness of our sex. I suppose I can't see Mr. Kerr this morning?"

"Not unless you wait lunch. If he is about, he comes in at one. I did not hear him say he had any country engagement to-day."

"I can't wait, thank you. I saw him last night as we drove from the station."

"Did you? He did not mention it. If you will not stay to-day, you will come again, I hope. When are you going to Annfield to see my son and his wife?"

"I heard Mrs. Allardyce say we dined there to-night, and somewhere else on Wednesday, and there is a dance on Thursday. Do you know I have not had so much

gaiety spread over the last seven years as will be crowded into the next seven days?"

"You have a hard life; yet you look well and happy and contented."

"I am all three, thank God. There are a great many worse off than me. I can work, and work is not denied me. Good-bye, Mrs. Kerr. I seem to know Eleanor better now that I have seen you; but, oh, I shall never forgive her for making this conversation necessary. I am motherless myself, and I have proved that in all the world we have but one mother."

She pressed the frail hands to her lips; but Mrs. Kerr, most unusually moved, clasped her close, and kissed her many times. And Frances went out of the house with wet eyes and a sore heart.

She looked about her very interestedly when she got out of doors; and seeing through the trees the group of farm buildings, walked deliberately to them. She had long been interested in the bearing of environment on character, and she was anxious to get a full and correct idea of what Eleanor's life had been before she left home. In all this there was no prying desire, and though frank and outspoken always, she never overstepped the bounds or made people consider her curious. She wanted particularly to see Mr. Kerr, and approached the farm buildings for that purpose. He happened to come out of the barn as she came round by the cattle-sheds, and he stared at her in amazement, not being accustomed to beholding such apparitions within the precincts of his own particular domain. Frances nodded to him as frankly and friendly as if she were in the habit of seeing him every day, and picked her way daintily across the wet court to him. The groom had just been washing the carriages, and the place ran in streams of water.

"Good-morning," she said, gaily. "You look rather petrified, Mr. Kerr. Do you remember who I am?"

"Perfectly—the lady I saw last night with Mrs. Allardyce," he announced, bluntly. "What are you doing here?"

"I have been calling on Mrs. Kerr, and I suppose I was moved by the natural curiosity of my sex to investigate the premises. May I have a look round?"

"If you like, but there's naething here to interest a London lady," he said, grimly.

"Is there not? But, you see, I'm not a London lady, but a country girl, whom circumstances oblige to live in London," she answered, glibly. "I am amazed at the vast domains you call farms here. My father is the vicar of a country parish, and half his parishioners are farmers, but they are only peasants, who live the peasant life."

"Oh, but there are big farms in England, too," he said. "A man I know went from Berwickshire to Essex and got half a countryside for nothing; but he cannot make a livin'. It must be gey puir land."

"Essex is, of course—at least, some parts of it. What are all these buildings for?"

"Cattle chiefly. Do you ken a cow from a stirk? I'll show you the places if you like. We've got some prize cattle that were shown last week east the coast," said Kerr, moved to affability by the frank and winning personality of Frances Sheldon.

"You are very kind. I should like above all things to see the prize cattle. I have seen all Mrs. Allardyce's prize poultry—a wonderful sight."

Kerr walked across the yard, one hand in his trouser pocket. Frances walked demurely behind, in her eyes a certain gleam of amusement. The situation interested her; it was something new.

The great door swung back, and she followed him into the spacious courts where the great sleek, overfed beasts lay among the straw, lazily chewing the cud, and turning their mild eyes on the intruders questioningly.

Cattle was Mr. Kerr's hobby, and finding Miss Sheldon interested, he was willing to expatiate thereon. Frances listened with an admirable display of intelligent interest, and all the time her concern was whether she dare mention Eleanor.

Mr. Kerr took pains to show her everything, and she did not withhold her admiration for the splendid arrangements which made the Haugh steading a model for agriculturists throughout the country.

"You'd better come back and have a bit lunch," he said, when they had finished their tour; "and I'll drive you over."

"Oh, no, thank you. Mrs. Kerr kindly asked me already, and I refused, as we have to dine at Annfield to-night, and I must get back quickly. I am very much obliged to you for taking so much trouble for me, and I shall not forget it."

"It was nae trouble. I was quite pleased. Are ye to mak' a long stay at Castlebar?"

"A week or ten days."

"That's no long. Hardly worth coming so far for."

"It's a long rest for me, and if I take too much license I may return to find my place filled up."

"What do you do, may I ask?"

"I write."

"What? Books?"

"Oh, nothing so ambitious—paragraphs for the newspapers; I'm a lady journalist. Perhaps I may write a description of what I have seen this morning, and send it to you for correction. I must have the weights of these tremendous beasts correctly."

Kerr laughed, thinking she was only making fun.

"You are a lively young woman. Did my wife ask you to come back to Haugh?"

"Yes, she did," said Frances, quickly, and feeling that her chance had come. "Mr. Kerr, I have no business, I know, being a perfect stranger, to say such a thing to you, but it is quite time, for her mother's sake, that Eleanor came home," she said, bravely.

Kerr turned from her swiftly, brought to the door of the carriage-house, and locked it with a snap, which sounded ominously in the girl's ears.

"Ay, an' what makes you think that?" he asked, brusquely, but not so ungently as she had feared.

"It is not what I think, Mr. Kerr, but what *is*. Mrs. Kerr is fretting her heart out. She is miserable, and Eleanor must come home."

"There is no good fretting for an ungrateful hizzie that was never anything but a heartbreak when she was here," he said, harshly.

"That is your view, sir; Mrs. Kerr is her mother," said Frances, simply.

"You bide wi' Eleanor, it seems. Does she see, now, what a fool she made o' herself and of us?"

"She does not say much; but I think she does."

"Then, you will admit that she was a fool for herself."

Frances nodded. She would have liked to contradict him, but justice demanded the truth.

"And what is she doing for her living?"

"Nothing at present," observed Frances, calmly. "We had a committee of ways and means on Friday before I left. She is harder up now than she has ever been. I don't suppose she will have a good dinner more than twice before I get back."

"It'll do her good," said Kerr, grumpily; but Frances, keenly observing, saw him wince.

"Do let her come while I am here, Mr. Kerr," she said, earnestly. "It will make your dear wile quite well."

"Good-day to you; I must to the house now," he said, brusquely. "No, I'm not angry, an' ye can come back the morn, if ye like."

He lifted his hat and walked away, leaving Frances rather petrified by the suddenness with which the interview had terminated.

"A good dinner twice a week," he muttered to himself, as he strolled across the park. "Guidsakes, it's awfu'!"



CHAPTER XXXI.

"HE HAS NOT IMPRESSED YOU."

THE days went by, and the breach was not healed between Haugh and Annfield. Alexander Kerr drank daily more than was good for him at Haugh, so did Claud at Annfield. Mary looked on in dismay for a day or two, and then took peremptory measures.

On a Tuesday, when Claud had gone off to Cupar market, Mrs. Heron came down to the dining-room, as was her wont, about eleven o'clock, after having breakfasted in bed, and found Mary, with a big white apron before her, on her knees at the sideboard.

"What on earth are you doing, Mary, working on your knees like any servant?" she queried, in surprise. Mrs. Heron took full advantage of the luxury and ease of her new estate, and gave the servants many a needless errand. She was, in truth, twenty times more exacting than the mistress of the house, and in the kitchen was not much beloved.

Mary did not at once reply. Her heart was very sore, because Claud had gone off in a dour temper after her remonstrance with him for drinking whisky before eleven o'clock in the day.

"What's the matter with you, and what are you

doing?" pursued Mrs. Heron in her most persistent way.

"Don't you see I'm clearing out the sideboard?" she replied, as she took bottle after bottle from the little cellar, and put the decanters in a row on the floor.

"But that's Maggie Sime's work, not yours. Doesn't she do the press and the sideboard out on Monday when she does her dining-room?"

"Yes. I'm not cleaning, mother. I said I was clearing out," replied Mary, rising with a half-filled decanter in each hand. The pantry, with the housemaid's sink and taps, adjoined, and she walked deliberately in there—Mrs. Heron following. And the next thing that astonished lady beheld was Mary turning the decanters bottom up in the sink.

"Bless me, Mary Heron!—have you taken leave of your seven senses?" she cried in horror. "Pouring good wine into a sink as if it were dish-washings."

"It's worse," said Mary, bitterly. "It brings ruin to every home where it gains the mastery. It shall not ruin mine." She emptied sherry, claret, and port, and the whisky after it, then she brought out the sealed bottles and broke their necks off on the earthenware edge of the sink. This was more than Mrs. Heron could stand.

"Stop, Mary, stop that sinful work," she cried, gripping her by the arm. "What good will that do you or Claud or anybody? There's plenty of drink outside, you silly bairn, and this will not keep him sober. Put it out of his sight, if you like; but don't waste the mercies, or you'll get a judgment on you for your pains."

"There shall not a drop be in this house if I can help it," said Mary, calmly continuing her work of destruction.

"But there's the cellar. Isn't there a lot there?" said Mrs. Heron, helplessly.

"There was; but I've been there, and it's empty now.

I broke every bottle in it, and Maggie carried the bits to the ashpit."

"You act like a foolish woman, and no good will come of it," observed Mrs. Heron, gloomily. "You have often heard that a drunken man can't be made sober by Act of Parliament, neither will you make Claud sober by this kind of conduct. It's in the Kerr blood, Mary, and ye'll need to make the best of your bargain."

"You didn't say that before, mother," said Mary, bitterly still. "Yes, I'll need to make the best of my bargain, and I'm likely to pay dearly for it."

She turned upon her heel and went through from the pantry to the hall, and thence by the front door to the open air, which met her coolly and refreshingly laden with the scent of hawthorn, and all the other nameless and subtly-sweet odours of the blossoming year. Her soul was sick, and her destiny, which only love could have gilded with divine hope, chafed her to the uttermost. It had given her a certain grim satisfaction to wantonly destroy every drop of drink in the house, but in her inmost heart she was conscious that it was a futile labour, since, if Claud desired it, he could get as much of it outside as he wanted. Looking ahead, she seemed to behold in Annfield a repetition of the life-history at Haugh, and her pity for herself increased. Yet there was a certain grim justice in her attitude, too. She blamed nobody, for she had deliberately, and with her eyes open, made her choice. Even Claud's own mother had one day asked her if she were not afraid to marry a Kerr, and with all the arrogance of youth and inexperience she had boldly answered no. She paced down the avenue a little bit, and then hearing the sound of hoofs, she listened attentively, wondering whether, by any possible chance, Claud could be coming back. Presently the horseman came in view; great was her surprise to recognise Mr. Kerr. It was the first time since the quarrel that he had come within the park gates of Annfield. She walked towards him a trifle eagerly, wondering whether his appearance boded good or ill.

His face was grave, and he shook hands with her without a smile.

"Is Claud at home?"

"No—he has gone to Cupar. Rode down to catch the eleven train. I wonder you didn't meet him."

"I came by the Haugh wood. The mistress is bad this morning. She wants to see Claud. When's he coming back?"

"The three train."

"I'll send down to meet him."

"Is Mrs. Kerr very ill?"

"She looks to me like a dying woman," he said, brusquely. "I'm going down now to telegraph for Eleanor."

Mary drew a breath of relief.

"Perhaps the sight of Eleanor will revive her. She has fretted after her very sore, Mr. Kerr; sorer than we know."

"Eleanor wasna worth it. Ye may thank your stars if ye never have a bairn, lassie; they're only thorns in the flesh."

"Not always," Mary ventured to say.

"You look but jimpy yoursel' yet," he observed, with that gruff kindness he always exhibited towards his son's wife. "I hear Claud's seldom sober—is that true?"

"He certainly takes more than is good for him," Mary admitted, yet with reluctance. She was developing the true wifely instinct, which devises a cloak or an excuse for every fault in her husband, and which is, unfortunately for us, rarer than it was. We do suffer in all ranks and relations of life from a lack of that reticence which is the hall-mark of every high and loyal nature.

"The lad's a fool for himself and for you. I have not patience with my own bairns; they have turned out but ill. I don't know why I should be so tried by ordinar'."

Mary looked at him steadily, wondering if he was really as unconscious and obtuse as he seemed. It was on her lips to remind him that neither by heritage nor

example were his own children likely to profit, and to bid him fairly divide the blame. But her anger of the morning was gone, and she was her prudent self again; even half-ashamed of her hasty act just accomplished within the house.

"I've just been pouring it all out," she said, frankly. "Every bottle, decanter, and jar that held anything intoxicating. Every blessed drop down the sink, and smashed up all the bottles. I am quite sure mamma thinks I have gone mad."

She rather enjoyed telling the little incident to her father-in-law. As I said before, there was in Mary's nature a spice of real quiet humour, which in happier circumstances might easily have been polished into wit. There was even a twinkle in her eye as she stated the plain fact, though it had been a bitter enough matter to her in the doing. Kerr listened, regarding her grimly, displeased by the wanton waste of excellent stuff, yet admiring the pluck of the slender little woman before him. He did not suppose that even in her most desperate moments had such an idea occurred to his wife.

"Well, you've got something in you. Poured it all out, did you? There'll be a bonnie row when my lord comes home, and wants to wet his whistle."

"If he doesn't get any more at Cupar he'll be all right; but these markets, I hate them; it is hardly possible for a man to get away from them sober."

"Faith there's something in that, lassie, but we can't do without a market for our stuff. I should have been at Cupar myself the day, only the mistress is very bad."

"Hadn't I better come down? I could easily stay till Eleanor comes."

"Well, it might be as well. I'll go meantime. There's nothing but worries in this world. So you emptied all the stuff down the sink? You'll keep him sober by hook or by crook. Well, I wish you success."

He gave her a nod and rode away.

Mary went back to the house with something new to

think of. She was not seriously alarmed as yet concerning Mrs. Kerr, who had given them all so much anxiety and so many painful shocks. She was pleased and thankful to hear that anything was bringing Eleanor home. The news diverted Mrs. Heron's mind from its sad contemplation of broken bottles and wasted wine, and she seemed extremely anxious to accompany Mary to Haugh; but Mary did not encourage her. She was too garrulous, and was apt to be fussy and noisy in a time of trouble. She begged her to remain and see to Annfield, promising to send up a detailed account of Mrs. Kerr's state in the evening. She was putting on her hat, her mother standing resignedly by, when another visitor arrived at Annfield in the person of Miss Frances Sheldon. Mary ran down to her buttoning her gloves, and bade her a pleasant good-morning. They had not seen very much of each other, though Frances had run her visit into the third week; yet they felt at home with each other, and very friendly. Both were sincere, and it was a pleasure to them to meet. The change and the rest among luxurious surroundings had done Frances Sheldon physically a world of good. The lines were all smoothed away from her face, and there was a lovely bloom on it, and a clear radiance in her eyes which made her almost beautiful. She seemed to Mary, as she shook hands with her, the very embodiment of perfect womanhood—sound of body and sound of mind, clean, healthy, and pure, and most pleasant to behold.

"How well you look!" she exclaimed. "Scotland has done you good."

"I should think it has. I had a letter from Eleanor this morning, and I have really come to say good-bye."

"When do you go?"

"To-morrow at ten. The plunge has to be taken some day, and I have had a scandalous amount of holiday-making. Besides, Eleanor is beginning to rebel."

"I'm just going down to Haugh," said Mary. "I

don't suppose you've heard Mrs. Kerr is very ill, and Eleanor has been sent for?"

"Has she really?"

"Mr. Kerr has just been here, and told me he has telegraphed. Will you stay and lunch with my mother, or drive down with me?"

"I'll go with you. I was going to walk to Haugh from here and say good-bye to Mrs. Kerr, and Mr. Allardyce was to fetch me when he came from the station at four. So Eleanor has been sent for. How soon can she be here?"

"Half-past eight to-morrow morning, if she travels all night, which she is certain to do."

"Then I'll wait another day. Poor Mrs. Kerr, she has taken suddenly worse, then?"

"I have heard no particulars; Mr. Kerr never gives any, he simply states facts. You'll excuse me hurrying you, but there's the wagonette."

They got in together and drove rapidly away.

"You've enjoyed your visit to Scotland, Frances?" said Mary, kindly.

"I can't speak about it," said Frances, simply. "Please, don't ask me. For some reasons I wish I had never come."

"That's rather ungrateful, isn't it? What are they?"

"I shall not tell you. But it's bad for a working woman of strictly limited means to sit in the lap of luxury even for a day. It makes her mad when she gets back to the grind again."

"Oh, you've too much sense for that," said Mary, lightly. "Besides, it is only those who have known hard times who appreciate good things."

"Much you know about it," observed Frances, calmly.

"Now you assume too much. Has Eleanor not told you how poor I was before I married Mr. Kerr?"

"No, nobody has told me. But what do you call poor?"

"Well, many a day I ate nothing but a bit of dry bread, washed down by a mouthful of tea."

Frances Sheldon stared incredulously. Hard times she had been through again and again, but she had never been so near starvation as that.

"You are not romancing?" she said.

"No, I'm not. My mother is a clergyman's widow. Through some mistake, which I can't explain, she could not participate in any fund available for clergymen's widows. We had absolutely nothing but some furniture left, and an old friend let us have the house we lived in for next to nothing. My brother, unfortunately for us, had never been taught any trade or profession. He was an artist, and had his way to make. I dabbled a little, too; but between us we could not keep ourselves in decent food. That is my story, so now you know that I understand and sympathise with poverty."

"But I can't understand why your brother didn't try some other work. I have no patience with such men. Why, I'd do anything to keep the wolf from the door."

Mary shook her head. The same thought had often occurred to her in the old hard days, and much irritation had been caused her by Willie's helpless attitude in their straits. But she had never reproached him, even with a look, and was heartily rejoiced over his brightening prospects, as if they could materially affect her own welfare.

"You know as well as I do, Frances, that there is no room in the world for the unskilled labourer," she replied, soberly. "But all that is past now, and we need not speak of it again. Then you take only kindly memories back with you from our cold north land?"

"I don't see where the cold comes in. It is perfect—perfect in every respect," replied Frances, with enthusiasm.

"And you have been very happy at Castlebar? Isn't Mrs. Allardyce fine?"

"She has made me happier than I have ever been since my own mother died. I thought I was a hardened, independent old party who had got over any desire for being coddled. I return with humility, for I know that my soft spot is as big as ever. That's where

we women suffer so awfully when we go out to fight alongside of men. We pretend we don't care for the sweet things of life, and that we like to push and scramble, and get as hard knocks as we give. It's a gigantic humbug with every one of us. We're born women, and we can't change our natures; more's the pity."

"You'll come back in Autumn, I should think?" said Mary, musingly. "What do you think of Robert Allardyce?" She put the question carelessly, and did not happen to look at Frances as she spoke.

"Oh, he's well enough," Frances answered, indifferently. "It would be queer if he were not all he should be with such a mother."

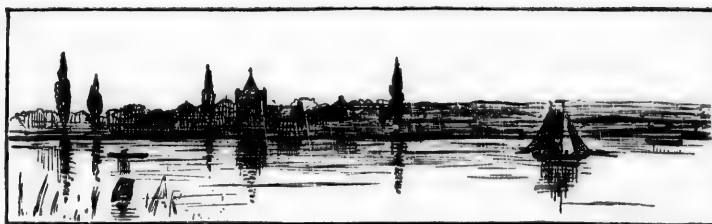
"He has not impressed you much, and I wonder at it, rather," said Mary. "He is considered rather a fine fellow in this neighbourhood, but I daresay his good qualities may be exaggerated. Well, here's Castlebar. Will you go all the way to Haugh with me?"

"No, thank you. I'll maybe come up in the evening. I'll go in now and tell Mrs. Allardyce the news; good-bye."

She alighted nimbly from the carriage, and waved her hand in farewell.

"He has not impressed you," she said to herself, grimly, as she passed through the wicket gate of Castlebar. "Go up one, Frances; you haven't given yourself away."





CHAPTER XXXII.

"A BIT OF EXPERIENCE."

ELEANOR had entered upon the duties of a new situation, and was wrestling with the same. Not that they were particularly onerous, or even clearly defined; she sometimes wished them more so. The week before Frances left she had obtained through an advertisement the post of secretary to the editor of a new weekly paper which was being extensively advertised. The promoter and proprietor was also editor; his name was Arthur Mallory, and he appeared to be possessed of considerable means. He had a handsome suite of rooms in a new building in Arundel Street, and his staff consisted of a sub-editor, a clerk, and an office boy. He was an old-young man—not ill-looking, though his manner did not inspire much confidence, nor his conversation any respect for his abilities. Frances had gone with Eleanor to the first interview, and had strongly advised her to decline the connection.

"If it isn't a bogus concern it'll burst up in a week or two," she said, with the cheerful confidence of one who can weigh up most things. "There isn't any brains to carry it on."

"But that doesn't matter to us—the brains, I mean—if he pays the salary," said Eleanor.

"But will he pay it, my dear? It's far too big to begin with, and there's no sort of clearness about what your work is to be. Besides, I don't like the man. Did he strike you as a gentleman?"

"Well, no—but I'd have thought you wouldn't have considered such a trifle as that," said Eleanor, severely.

"Wouldn't you? I am sorry I have conveyed to you the impression that I prefer a cad to a gentleman any day," observed Frances, in her most sarcastic vein. "My idea was that he was more impressed with your looks than your other capabilities. I don't think it pays to be quite so good-looking as you, Eleanor."

"Don't be silly," said Eleanor, with excessive dignity. "I'm not going to throw away thirty shillings a week for anything so idiotic as that."

"Very well, don't come to grief till I get back from Scotland; and don't send me harrowing details in letters. I've earned my holiday; I need it very badly; and I want to enjoy it," said Frances, and no more was said on the subject.

Mr. Arthur Mallory was a person of considerable means, and he had fallen on the surest way to dissipate them. Having tried most forms of speculative enjoyment, he now sought experience as a journalist. He had bought an expiring concern at a fabulous price from its promoters, and he dreamed fond dreams of making both fame and fortune out of the weekly *Paragon*. He had no special talent in any direction, least of all the literary, and he had safeguarded himself, as he imagined, by retaining the services of the former editor as his subordinate, and with these slender chances of success launched his venture.

Eleanor's duties were to write letters to his dictation, and to help him in a great many other ways not mentioned in his terms of agreement. When she found she was expected to provide "The Ladies' Column," she sat aghast.

"My dear Miss Kerr, it's as easy as ninepence," he said, civilly. "I could do it myself, if I had the time.

All you've got to do is to take a walk in Bond Street, or Regent Street, and look at the clothes on the women you meet. You must try, anyhow, for it's certain that Clutterbuck can't, and I won't."

Eleanor did try, and with considerable success. Given an observant eye and a facile pen, any woman can concoct the ladies' column, and Eleanor's was written neither much better nor much worse than the average; it was good ordinary work. It rather amused her, and she looked forward to sundry laughs over it with Frances when she should return. The first number of the resuscitated *Paragon* sold very well; and Mr. Mallory was much elated. Eleanor often wished he would talk less in the office. Sometimes his manner jarred upon her exceedingly.

A girl like Frances Sheldon, well used to the free-and-easy conditions of journalistic work, would have put Mr. Mallory in his place easily, and kept him there. His personal admiration for her, suppose he had evinced any, would not have troubled her at all; if it had, she could have nipped it in the bud. But it was a different matter with Eleanor. She had all a girl's consciousness of herself; she felt uncomfortable working in the same room with Mr. Arthur Mallory; and his manner of speech, which seemed to indicate a sort of partnership and mutual interest, made her vaguely miserable. It might all be in the way of business, but she did not like it. Everything happened just as Frances had foreseen. She had during her seven years' experience witnessed several cases not entirely dissimilar. But Eleanor breathed nothing of her discomfort in her brief letters; and Frances took her full meed of enjoyment in Scotland, untroubled by any visions of Eleanor in difficulties.

Eleanor's employer could lay no claim to literary taste, yet he had a curious hankering after the literary life, and had a large acquaintance among a certain class of writers. He was a member of various clubs, whose receptions he regularly attended, and he had taken up this venture with the idea of further advancing himself

along the high road to literary success. But his ability was, unfortunately, of the most mediocre type; he had none of the business qualities which go to make success. His purchase of the *Paragon* was looked upon as a huge joke, which amused all who knew him. He was not in himself an entirely objectionable person, being good-natured and lavish with the money he had inherited, but never could have earned; but he did not commend himself to Eleanor Kerr's rather fastidious taste. When he had anything to discuss with her he had an unpleasant habit of sitting on the edge of the desk, so very near to her that she invariably had to push her chair back. Before she had been a week in his employment she began to think it possible that thirty shillings might be too dearly earned. But she resolved to persevere, at least until Frances came back. Existence in London without that bright, unfailing spirit was a burden rather heavy to be borne, and the evenings in the little flat, which seemed so empty without her, were intolerably long. Altogether, these were hard times for Eleanor, and when she pictured Frances sitting by the hospitable hearth at Castlebar, beside her people, who possessed every quality commanding respect and love, though she, Eleanor, had once despised them, her eyes were often dim with a little moisture, born of envy and a vain regret.

It will be seen that the priceless wisdom, taught by experience, was strongly working its leaven in that undisciplined heart. One bright and lovely morning she trudged off to Arundel Street with even greater reluctance than usual. She had now entered upon the third week of her engagement, and Frances was not home, nor had she yet set a day for her return. Nothing but the daily hope of that bright event sustained her, for her position was growing unbearable. She had, indeed, decided to give notice that very day. She was ten minutes late, but Mr. Mallory was always indulgent. She found him already at his desk, and he looked worried and upset. He had launched himself upon a sea of troubles,

and was surrounded with a mass of correspondence which fairly confused and bewildered him.

"Good-morning, Miss Kerr; come and create order out of this chaos. Did you ever behold anything so appalling? And what a lot of confounded rubbish it all is. Sit down; now I see you my troubles seem to vanish. We'll polish 'em all off in the twinkling of an eye."

Eleanor took off her jacket in silence, and hung it on the peg behind the door.

"There seems to be a very large number of letters. Hadn't Mr. Clutterbuck better come in? He understands how to deal with them. He will help me to do it in half the time," she said, pointedly.

She looked at Mr. Mallory as she spoke, and despised him in her heart. He was short and puffy and squat, with a ruddy face, full black eyes, and a heavy black moustache. He wore a white waistcoat and a large gold chain, from which dangled several heavy seals; his fat fingers were adorned by several gaudy rings.

"Oh, I don't think we want Clutterbuck; besides, he's out on some printing business. Besides, to tell you the truth, Miss Kerr, I don't want Clutterbuck to get in so far. I mean to keep him in the dark a bit, and let him see that it is possible to run the *Paragon* successfully without his valuable assistance. You and I are quite able to manage it. That last article you wrote has gone down, I can tell you. Everybody wants to know who the dickens is Belinda who writes our ladies' column!"

Eleanor did not even smile. She felt no elation, but a growing disgust with the whole situation.

"Well, if Mr. Clutterbuck is not coming, I can go over them, and put into the waste-paper basket what is useless. This will take me more than an hour," she said, as she approached the desk.

"I'll help you, Miss Kerr. Don't you think I'm right about Clutterbuck? He's an upsetting little cad. Had the impudence to tell me this morning I'd be burst up

—these were his very words—vulgar little ass that he is—burst up in a month. We'll show him something different—sha'n't we?"

"Mr. Clutterbuck has had a good deal of experience," said Eleanor, calmly; "and I have always thought him very sensible. He thinks, as I do, that we ought to pay more for contributions, and get some good people to write for us."

"Oh, that's all nonsense! Clutterbuck wants to log roll some of his chums. What we want to get is new talent. It's economical, and it's fresh. Why, if you liked, you could do the story as well as Belinda's letter."

Eleanor's lips faintly curled. She did not even feel amused.

"I'm quite sure I couldn't, Mr. Mallory; I have never written a line of fiction in my life."

"But that's no reason why you shouldn't try," observed Mr. Mallory, encouragingly and confidentially. "Just look here, suppose you do the story and Belinda's letter, and I'll do all the pars. and select the poetry. Don't you see we could run the thing for almost nothing. It would be a company concern, and none of the profits would go to outsiders."

"But I'm an outsider," said Eleanor, and next moment regretted the speech.

"No, you're not; at least, if you are, it's your own fault. I don't want you to be an outsider," said Mr. Mallory, impressively. "Do you think I'd make such an offer to everybody? Why, it's because it's you."

"I think we'd better be going on with the letters," said Eleanor, coldly. "We've lost nearly half-an-hour, and look at them."

She broke the seal of one, and spread it out before her, but she could not read it under the gaze of Mr. Mallory's eyes.

"What's half-an-hour? We've all day and all week before us. Come, Eleanor, look up at me. Of course you must have seen how soft I am about you. It's no

nonsense ; I'm in dead earnest. I mean it to be a company concern, fair and square. What do you say ? ”

“ I say I am paid for to do a certain amount of work of a certain kind, and I have been doing it to the best of my ability. I prefer matters to remain just as they are, and I do strongly advise you to take full advantage of Mr. Clutterbuck's experience and ability, or the paper will certainly come to grief.”

“ Oh, hang it all, that's not what I'm driving at. I'm away from business altogether, miss. I'm in the sentimental track, though I thought I was proof against it. I'm asking you to marry me, Eleanor.”

“ Oh, no thank you.”

Eleanor leaped up, her cheeks flaming, her eyes flashing fire. Mr. Mallory rather enjoyed this little outburst, thinking she did not realise her good fortune.

“ My dear little girl, I'm in dead earnest. I see you don't believe it. Of course it isn't usual for a man to propose to the young person he employs ; but you're different, and I'm a straight chap.”

Eleanor took one stride to the door, swooped her jacket from its peg, and turned on him ere going like a tragedy queen.

“ Oh, if only my father or my brother were here, they'd horsewhip you for your impertinence,” she cried, indignantly, and ran out of the office, to the no small astonishment of the office-boy, whose dense countenance assumed a denser look.

She had sufficient presence of mind to pause in one of the passages and put on her jacket, also to pull down her veil to shield her red and angry face. Perhaps it was natural that she should exaggerate the whole circumstances, and imagine herself insulted and degraded. A girl like Frances could have laughed over the episode, and chalked it up under the column of experience, but poor Eleanor couldn't yet accept it as such. The limit of her endurance was reached. Her first impulse was to go home to Scotland by the earliest possible train, and bid an eternal farewell to the life which she had once ideal-

ised, and which she had now bitterly proved to be sordid and unsatisfying, and more full of petty restrictions and annoyances than the old life, which seemed by contrast a paradise of peace. She felt no inclination to go back to Barker Street; the sunshine and the summer wind wooed her to the Park. She took a 'bus to the Marble Arch, and entering the Park, sat down listlessly on a seat beside a smart nursemaid, who had two babies in a gilded carriage. It was only eleven o'clock; the whole day was before her—what to make of it she did not know. She felt horribly alone, and sick of life. She was still sitting, conversing a little with the nursemaid, who was garrulous, and inclined to give particulars regarding the family she served, when Adrian Brabant entered the Park on his way to keep an appointment with a theatrical star at Queen's Gate. His eye, casually resting on the seat where Eleanor sat, could scarcely trust its own accuracy of vision. She saw him, too, and with a look of surprise and pleasure she rose hurriedly and went to meet him. Her appearance there at such an hour indicated to him that there was something amiss.

"You are enjoying an early airing," he said, with that kind, brotherly look which always made troubles seem as nothing.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," she cried, totally oblivious of the interested scrutiny of the nursemaid. "May I walk with you wherever you are going?"

"Certainly; but what has happened to you? I thought you were engaged in the severest and most engrossing of literary work at this hour of the day."

"I've run away. Oh, pray, don't ask me any questions, Adrian. That hateful man. I shall kill him if I can get a chance."

"Mallory!" exclaimed Adrian, in no small amazement. "Why, I know him very well. He's a good fellow."

"He may be good, but he is hateful all the same. How dared he to ask me to marry him—how dared he?"

Adrian tried to suppress a whistle.

"Oh, that's it; never mind, these sort of things are always happening," he said, making this large assertion to put her at her ease. "Let's talk of something else. Is Frances home? and are you coming to the Burlington to-night?"

"Frances has forgotten all about me. I haven't even heard from her for four whole days. I don't believe she ever will come back. Is this the great night?"

"Why, yes. I didn't think you would have forgotten," said Adrian, in mild reproach.

"I know I oughtn't, but I've been worried to death nearly. I hate London. It ought to be sunk in the bottom of the sea."

Adrian smiled under his soft felt hat, and his eyes had a satisfied look.

The desired reaction had come.

"Well, then, you must come and see the play, of course. I'll make some arrangements, and you shall be fetched by some responsible person in good time, even if I come myself. I think, somehow, the thing is going to do."

"I am so glad to hear it; but why, of course it will. Everybody knew all along it would be a beautiful and a perfect play; you could never do anything mean or second-rate. Wait till to-morrow."

They walked together to the Albert Hall, then Eleanor took another 'bus and went leisurely home. She arrived to find her father's telegram; and when Adrian called to take her to the play, she had gone to St. Pancras to catch the north-going train.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

"THE FORMER THINGS HAVE PASSED AWAY."

THE sun lay warm and golden across the floor of Mrs. Kerr's bedroom, and a yellow shaft lay athwart the bed, touching her pale hand tenderly where it lay above her white handkerchief, whose hue it matched. A hospital nurse in her dainty attire sat quietly near the window reading, supposing her patient to be asleep. But she was not. Her eyes were watching the sunshine on her hand, and there was a faint, sweet smile on her lips, as if she responded to its caress. She did not look much worse than when she had been on her feet about the house, but she was so weak that she could not lift her head. Her suffering was chiefly great weakness—acute pain she had none. She knew very well that she had taken to her bed now for the last time, and that soon her place would know her no more for ever. The thought brought no terrors to the pious mind of Alison Kerr. She had long made her peace with Heaven; the sorrows of life had driven her up higher for consolation, and she waited now in the sure and certain hope that He in whom she had trusted would not fail her in her hour of need. Yet was she not quite weaned away from earth; there were still some things she would fain set right, and she had asked God to grant her two desires, and the

waiting on their fulfilment gave to her eye a certain restless glance. Her sharpened ear heard the foot of her husband on the gravel long before it disturbed the nurse, who started in amazement when she called to her.

"Mr. Kerr has come back, nurse. Tell him to come up."

"I thought you were asleep," she said, quickly. "I shall fetch him if you promise not to talk."

"I won't promise that—it's to talk I want him. Let him come."

There was a certain quiet imperiousness which commanded obedience. The nurse's practical eye discerned that it did not much matter whether she talked or not; she was, however, saved going downstairs by the entrance of Mr. Kerr. His concern for his wife was most genuine, and could not be hid. The nurse believed him to be a most devoted husband.

"Can I come in?" he asked, in that loud, painful whisper persons in health sometimes deem essential to a sickroom, and at the same time crossing the room on tiptoe, his effort to balance himself thus causing the whole room to shake.

"Yes, come, Alec," said his wife, trying to stretch out her feeble hand to him. "Bring me a mouthful of wine, nurse, then go down and get your lunch. Mr. Kerr will stay by me till you come back."

The nurse gave her the stimulant, and quietly withdrew.

"Well, I've telegraphed to Eleanor, and been up at Annfield. Will that please you, Alison?"

She nodded.

"Speak in your ordinary voice, Alec, and just sit down there a minute," she whispered. "I want to say something to you."

"Are you able?" he said, drawing in a chair to the bedside.

"Oh, yes, I feel all right. Eleanor will be here to-morrow morning, Alec, sure. You will take her back as if she had never gone away, or was returning from an ordinary visit. Promise me that."

"I'll do my best," said Kerr, and he meant what he said.

"And you'll make it up with Claud, dear, or perhaps you have made it up. Did you see him?"

"No, he's at Cupar. He'll be back at three. I'll send Andrew Kidd down for him. Mary'll be here directly."

"I thought she would; and after this morning I'll not have many chances to speak alone with you, even if I'm able, so I'll say my say now."

"Are you really going to leave me, Alison?" asked Kerr, helplessly as a baby. He seemed to realise in a moment what this frail woman had been to him all these years; how she had maintained the honour of his house, and been the very mainstay of his life.

"Yes, Alec, I'm going now," she said, "and I think I'm glad."

"Glad, are you? Have I been that ill to you?" he asked, and his voice had a strange harshness in it.

"No, no, but I'm tired being useless. I've been a poor wife to you this year or two back, aye ailing. A man tires of it."

"I never said I was tired of it," he said, roughly. "Bide, woman, bide a bit, an' gie me a chance."

It was a cry wrung from the very inner depths of the man's heart. Such love as he was capable of had been given entirely to this woman, and his soul clave to her. Also there rose up before him, as before many a man and woman in like circumstances, a thousand accusing shapes, memories of harsh words and selfish deeds, thoughtless cruelties too small and petty to be given a name, but which had lain darkly on the sensitive soul that brooded over them; an intolerable anguish of remorse possessed him, till he could have cried aloud. But he only sat still, with the sweat drops standing on his brow and some of the ruddiness gone out of his cheeks.

"I don't know what for you should die at fifty, Alison. The Dunlops are long-lived. What has killed you?"

Very well she could have told him, but she only looked at him with a steady gentleness, and smiled.

"It is the Lord's time—and maybe I'll do more good by my death than by my life."

"That's not possible, Alison. There's not your marrow in a' Fife. That's been it all along—you've been too good for Haugh an' for me. I wish to God I had my life to live again."

"So do I. Alec, don't blame yourself too much for such discord as there has been sometimes in the house. Half the fault is mine. Long ago, when I might have done almost what I liked with you, I cared nothing, because I was thinking of some one else. So I sinned against you at the beginning. And afterwards when I saw how wicked I had been, and tried to atone, it was too late, for I had made you indifferent too. Oh, if wives only knew what I could tell them, there would be less heartbreak in many a married home."

Kerr sat still, saying nothing. The thing was not new to him. He had soon learned that his wife's heart was cold to him, and guessed that its love had followed another man across the sea. But whatever impression that bitter thought may have made on his mind in the early days of his married life, he had never suffered any allusion to it to fall from his lips. He had a certain fierce pride that forbade it.

"We've made but a poor attempt at a home here, Alec," she said, with a great gentleness. "But, perhaps, we may have a chance to better it yonder."

Kerr put his hand over his eyes, and his face was troubled. This life and its concerns held all his hopes, the "yonder," of which his wife spoke so familiarly and so confidently, had no place on the horizon of his vision.

"I wish you'd get better, Alison, or I make you a better man," was all his cry, and it wrung his wife's heart.

"Listen to me, dear, these are the last words I shall be able to say to you, and you will think of them when I am gone. I can't get better. To-morrow, or next

day at latest, I shall be away. I'm not in the least afraid to die, because I know there is a place prepared for me, and that I am forgiven for the wrong I did you, and for every other sin. I have tried to be a dutiful wife to you, and if I'd been stronger, Haugh might have been a brighter home both for you and the bairns. I want you to be kind to them when I'm away, father and mother both to Claud and Eleanor, and they'll repay you, Alec, love for love. In this world love is the only coin which is always repaid with full interest. Will you promise?"

"I'm not that kind of man, Alison, to be kissing and fondling, I mean, but I'll do my best, and I'm done with the drink, so help me, God."

She raised herself on her arm with a newly-acquired strength, and looked at him eagerly; his words had fallen on her ear and heart like an evangel.

"If you keep to that, Alec, peace will come to Haugh, an' bide, and I shall have done more good by my death than my life."

She managed to put her hand up to his face and draw it down to hers, and so there was a moment's silence. Then Haugh got up and went from the room, and as he got to the door a great sob shook him, and he sat on the stairs sobbing and crying, for the first time in his life, like a little child.

He was out of doors before Mary arrived, away over the fields, wandering aimlessly with eyes that saw nothing, and ears upon which the familiar country sounds fell dully. Kerr of Haugh had never spent such a day in his life. He knew nothing of that wonderful sustaining grace afforded by the Christian faith in times of trouble. The cloud that had fallen across his life was intolerably dark, unrelieved by a single gleam of brightness or hope. True, he had attended church services all his days with passable regularity, and was familiar with the tenets of the Christian creed. But all that was apart from his daily living and daily thinking, and had never been an influence of any kind to him, much less reality.

Therefore in his extremity it had no message for him. A hot and bitter rebellion raged within him as he walked about his own lands surveying the broad and smiling acres, thinking of his wealth, which could not purchase peace of mind or a moment's immunity from pain. In his small way he had been an autocrat and an arbiter of destinies, and now brought face to face, as every human creature is, sooner or later, with his own pitiful impotence, he raged against it in his soul. His wife, whom he loved, though he had used her but ill, was dying, and not all that he could do or give would keep her with him another hour. The past continued to stand darkly haunted by accusing shapes before Alexander Kerr, and the future seemed to hold nothing but alarms. He could not help thinking that one day his hour would come, and dying would be a very different matter to him. He tried to banish these unpleasant thoughts, but they had him in grips, and would not go at his bidding. So he wandered, a beaten and miserable man, for hours among the sunlit fields, unconscious of the flight of time, of hunger, or waiting duties to which he was usually a slave.

When Mary arrived she ran up at once to the sick-room, and knelt down by the bed. Strange and unnatural as it may seem, the love she bore to Claud's mother was more quick and passionate than the affection she had for her own.

"Don't go," she cried, sobbing. "We can't do without you. I, most of all. Stay with us a little while."

"Not now; my time has come, dearest," said Mrs. Kerr, fondly. "It is easier for me to go now I know my son has the home you have made for him."

"Oh, it is not as you think!" Mary cried, too miserable to care. "We don't get on; we are not happy. I can't stop Claud drinking, and I have no patience with him. I am always harsh to him. I try not to be, but I can't help it. Our marriage was a terrible mistake."

"It could not be, dearie, if you loved each other."

"But I didn't," cried Mary, abasing herself entirely. "I thought only of the freedom from poverty it would

give me, and I liked him, and hoped it would come all right ; but it hasn't, and I think he knows it."

The white lips of Alison Kerr seemed to blanch still more. She had not been prepared for this, and it was a blow to her.

"God forbid that my sin should be so perpetuated," she whispered. "Listen, Mary. I married Claud's father though I loved another man, and a curse has followed me all my days. If you have done likewise, I can only say, God help you and him."

Mary kept her face hidden—stricken with remorse for having laid this new sorrow on that gentle heart. But somehow the words had been forced from her, and it was a relief to tell.

"Do forgive me ; I am selfish and cruel. I will still do my best, dear Mrs. Kerr, and perhaps God will help me. To-morrow Eleanor will be here—perhaps that will help you to get well."

"I will live till she comes. I think some brighter days will dawn for Haugh after I am away."

"It will never be Haugh without you. There is mourning over the whole country-side. Everybody loves you. I wonder why it is the good God always takes, and leaves the cumberers of the ground. I am sure there are not too many good people in the world—not half so many as we need."

"It will be made plain to us some day. Mary, my husband is feeling it very much, I can see ; more than I expected. Promise you will try and comfort him when I am gone. He likes you, and you will be able to help Eleanor to make Haugh a home for him. You can do anything with him in the right way, but he can't be driven."

"He has always been most kind to me. I'll do what I can if he will let me ; but, oh, perhaps, even yet God will let you live. I am hoping great things from Eleanor's coming to-morrow. Joy sometimes works wonders."

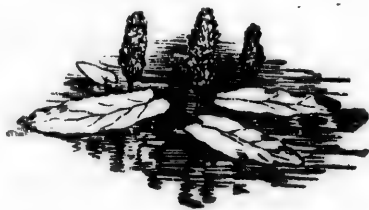
Alison Kerr shook her head, and her eyes looking

through the big window saw the sun flashing on the sea, and her lips moved.

Mary laid her head down on the pillow, and caught the faintly-whispered words.

"There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain—for the former things have passed away."

And she knew then that the soul of Alison Kerr was weaned away from earthly things, and set upon that holy city where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.



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CHAPTER XXXIV.

"IT'S YOU WHO HAVE DONE THIS."

CLAUD KERR had left the house in a bad temper that morning, and it remained with him throughout the day. Several people who met him in the train and also at the market place at Cupar observed that he seemed sullen, morose, and out of sorts. He had gone to Cupar that day with a set purpose—to buy the horse his father had forbidden him to think of—and he felt disappointed that George Hunter of Blair was not in the market when he arrived. He was eager to show that he was master of the situation ; he still smarted under the sense of humiliation his father had inflicted on him at Kirkcaldy the previous week. It was a slack time in all markets, and many farmers were too busy on their land to attend, there being nothing of consequence in May to buy or sell. Claud, however, saw several people whom he knew, and was surprised at the non-appearance of his father, who had not missed Cupar market, that he could remember, for twenty years. He lounged about till time for the ordinary at the hotel, and was thinking of going home directly he had eaten, when he saw George Hunter drive up the street with the mare in question in his gig. She was a showy beast apt to catch the eye at first sight, but she was full of tricks, and there was some

vice in her eye as she cast it about her—putting her ears back on the least provocation.

George Hunter was a breeder of horses, and a great frequenter of shows. Nothing was alleged against his character, but that he could drive a very hard bargain, and always managed to come unscathed out of a bad one. He had once taken in Mr. Kerr with a colt, and had never been forgiven for it. In fact, Kerr mortally hated his very name, and Claud knew it very well. That was why his father was in such a passionate rage at the mere mention of his dealing with him.

Claud's eye brightened as he beheld the horse-dealer, and he hastened to him.

"You haven't got the beast sold yet?" he observed, eyeing her very favourably. "Are you on to treat to-day?"

"I thought it was off—that your governor had put the peter on you," observed Hunter, slyly.

"Oh, not he; he'd had a glass too much, and I oughtn't to have argued with him," said Claud, carelessly, though he felt annoyed. "Come and have a bit dinner, and we'll talk it over."

Hunter put up his trap, nothing loth, and accompanied Claud to the public table, which was getting thinned, the market being nearly over. They had practically one end of the table to themselves. Claud took a good dinner and drank freely. Hunter was, indeed, surprised at the quantity of spirits he seemed able to take in the middle of the day.

"I say, you're no feared, Claud. You'd better stop. Mind we've to get home," he observed. "And what'll the wife say?"

George Hunter was essentially a vulgar person, and fond of personal allusions, which he regarded as jokes.

"Oh, she'll not say much," answered Claud, confidently. "Just guess what she said this morning, though—that she'd pour every blessed drop of drink in the house down the sink before I got back; and, hang me I believe she'll do it, too!"

"A needless wastry, surely," observed Hunter. "Is she the grey mare, Claud?"

"She'd like to be," said the foolish lad, whose tongue was loosened by his potations. "But I'll allow no woman to lord it over me; no, nor man, and that my father is beginning to see."

"I think you're quite right. It's time you were your own master now; near thirty, aren't you?"

"Well no, not quite; but I'm getting on. You're a wise chap, Hunter, to keep your bachelor freedom. A wife rather hampers a fellow; but mine's beginning to see that it won't do to curb me too tight."

Poor Claud! It was pitiful to hear him, and it was well that Mary had no idea that she was being thus talked of. She would not have believed it though she had been told. A finer nature—such as Allardyce—would have put a stop to such talk, and guided it into other channels; but the horse-dealer enjoyed it, and would roll Claud's silly words under his tongue like a sweet morsel for many a day—making fun of him behind his back to others as vulgar and little-minded as himself. Claud was inclined to sit on at the hotel table, but Hunter was in a hurry to get home himself, and he wanted his bargain struck before they parted.

"Well, are you for the beast or no, Claud? because I must get away home. Mind, I'm not that anxious to sell, for there's plenty seeking her, and I'm going to jump her at Earlstown next month."

"But I want her, man; she's the very beast for that high dogcart Allardyce gave me. What's your price?"

"Ninety guineas, not a halfpenny less."

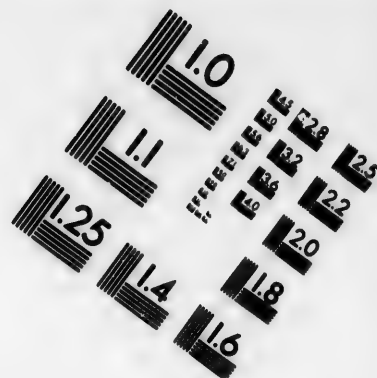
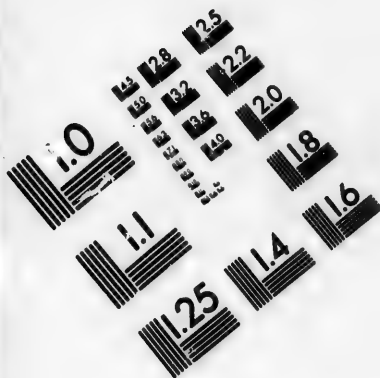
"But the governor says she's not worth a penny more than fifty."

"He says that because he has a spite against me," replied Hunter. "That's my price; and, as I said, I'm not deen' to sell."

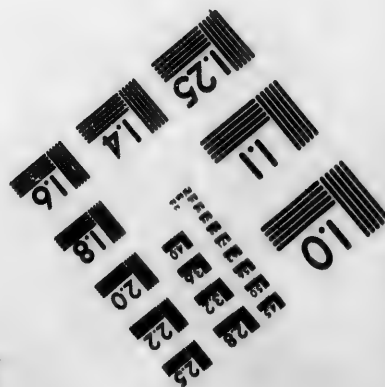
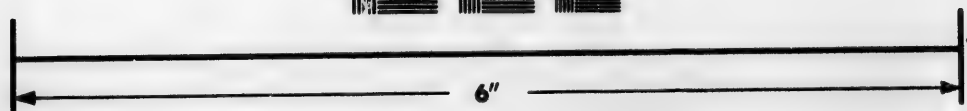
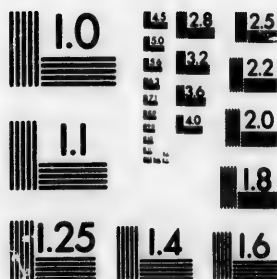
"It's a lot of money," said Claud. "But I want the beast. Will you let's have her a fortnight on trial?"

"No, I will not," replied the horse-dealer. "She's





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sound's a bell. Ramage 'll tell you that. Take her or not, Claud, as you like. I'm no carin'."

Claud hesitated, and said he'd think over it.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, then, because I see you want her. Say ninety, and I'll give you a fiver back as a luckpenny. I can't say fairer than that, an' she's dirt cheap at the money ; but it must be cash down."

"All right. I'll give you the cheque now, and you can send her down to-morrow," said Claud.

Hunter was rather surprised to see him take a fat pocket-book from his coat, and calling for pen and ink he wrote out the cheque. Of course he did not know that Claud had only a few pounds to his credit at the bank, and thought it was all right.

He was hugely pleased over his bargain, and, of course, they had another nip over it, and when Claud set out to the station he was walking very unsteadily. It was more than sad to see the change these few days had wrought in Claud, and it showed the absolute need for one of his disposition and temperament to abstain altogether from intoxicating drink ; with him no middle course would avail. He just managed to catch the train which brought him to Kinghorn Station at three o'clock, and to his astonishment Andrew Kidd was waiting for him with the Haugh gig in the station yard.

"Hulloa ! what's up ?"

"The mistress is not so well, sir, an' you've to come up."

"But where's my horse ?"

"It's been sent home, I think. Mrs. Kerr is at Haugh. She came down in the morning."

Comprehending it rather dimly, Claud got in, and they drove away. Andrew Kidd saw well enough that the young laird had had more than was good for him ; he talked incessantly, and of things he should not have mentioned in a servant's hearing. Andrew was in full possession of all the facts concerning Hunter's mare before they came near the gates of Haugh.

Mr. Kerr was still wandering about aimlessly, not

caring to be in the house, nor yet to be far from it, and he met the gig at the bend in the avenue where a road branched off towards the stables. He saw how it was with Claud whenever his face came in view, and a hot anger rose in him, and he turned on his heel. But Claud made Andrew Kidd stop the gig, and bidding him go on to the stables, jumped out and followed his father.

'You'd better go on to the stables, an' bide there,' the old man said, sourly. "Ye are fitter company for cattle beasts than for folk. Either that, or gang hame. Ye winna set foot in Haugh this day."

"Ay will I," said Claud, with that braggart air of false courage whisky can give. "I'll show you I'm no a bairn to be bidden do this or that as you like."

"Your mother's dying, Claud. To see ye as ye are would not make her last hours more peaceable," said Kerr, quietly, for he was in no mood to quarrel or to argue, and all things seemed out of joint.

"No fear of her dying. She'll live a long time yet," said Claud, carelessly. "Say—I've closed with George Hunter the day about his mare, and given him a cheque for his money—ninety guineas—an' he gave me a fiver back as a luckpenny."

Kerr's face grew purplish, and his eyes gleamed. It was not the place nor the time for an unseemly wrangle with his son, nor did he desire it, but he felt sorely tempted to knock him down.

"An' who'll honour your cheque, think you? I didna ken ye had ninety pennies to your name, let alane ninety guineas?" he asked with a sneer.

"It'll need to be honoured," said Claud, quickly. "You have brought me up a gentleman, and if you put me to shame now before the world for a beggarly hundred pounds, I'll—"

"Ca canny," said Kerr, "an' haud your tongue or ye be sober. That brute's not worth a penny more than fifty, an' if you're set on't, I'll pay fifty to be at an' end o' the matter. But only if you be at an end o' your

dealings wi' George Hunter; he's the greatest black-guard that ever walked."

"He's a straight enough chap, and he knows a good horse. You'll need to pay the full amount, for I've given him my cheque for it the day, before I left Cupar market."

"It's easy for a man to write a cheque; getting the money for it's another matter," observed Kerr, drily. "But I'm for nae mair o' this talk. You'd better gang quietly away home to Annfield, Claud, and I'll send your wife after you. Ye can come back the morn an' see your mother, if ye can behave yoursel', an' if she be alive."

"I'm going to see her now," said Claud, defiantly, striding towards the house.

His father turned blazing eyes upon him, and gripped him by the arm.

"D'ye hear what I say, man! Your mother's dying. We've killed her among us. I'll keep ye oot o' the house if I should fell you to the ground."

"Let me go," cried Claud, angrily. "I'm not a bairn to be ordered about by you; an' it's time you knew it. I want to know what you're going to do for me, now you've put me in Annfield? I need money to carry on the place; and money I will have, if I steal it. It's mine, anyhow. Haugh belongs as much to me as to you, and I will have my fair share."

Kerr contemptuously smiled. He had made up his mind, for his wife's sake, to be kind and conciliatory to his son, but in the face of this it was not easy.

"Awa' hame, man, an' keep yoursel' sober. I wonder ye dinna think shame."

"It's you that should think shame. If I'm no sober, you know whose example I'm following."

Exasperated beyond measure, Kerr raised his hand and hit Claud across the mouth; and the next moment Claud, in a blind fury, had him in grips. Andrew Kidd, washing down his trap in the stable-yard, could catch a glimpse of them struggling, and he ran for James, the

old coachman, who was in the harness-room. Together they hastened to the spot just as Claud gave his father a blow which sent him reeling backwards. He fell heavily, being no light weight, and lay quite still on the green sward, and the sight sobered Claud, and sent a chill fear to the hearts of the two servants as they bent over him.

"Oh! Master Claud, ye've killed ye're ain father," cried James Wilson with a kind of wail.

"Oh no, he'll be all right in a minute or two. Run up to the house, Andrew, for some water and some brandy."

The lad was not many minutes gone, and Kitty Niven came flying back with him, but the brandy they forced between his teeth failed to revive him. Claud, now thoroughly alert and sobered, bade Andrew Kidd help him, and they carried the master of Haugh up to the house, and having laid him on the couch in the smoke-room, Claud had sufficient presence of mind to despatch the groom on horseback to the nearest doctor. The commotion below communicated itself upstairs, and Mary slipped out of the sick-room to learn what it was all about. She met Katie Niven on the stairs, her face as white as her apron.

"Don't go down, Mrs. Claud; please, don't."

"Why, girl? What has happened?"

"Something's happened the master. He's in the smoke-room; he looks like dead. Dear Mrs. Claud, don't go down."

Mary brushed past her and ran down. To her astonishment her own husband met her at the smoke-room door.

"You here, Claud! What has happened Mr. Kerr? He went out at lunch perfectly well."

Claud never spoke. His face was ashen-hued, and he trembled as with ague. She opened the door and went in, to behold the prostrate form of her father-in-law on the sofa and James Wilson, who had served the house all his days, kneeling beside him wringing his hands.

"What has happened? Will nobody tell me what has happened?" she asked, imperiously.

"Tell me if he's deid, Mistress Claud," said James Wilson. "You've seen a heap o' trouble. Tell me if he's deid."

She stooped down and laid her hand on his heart.

"No he isn't. Come here, Claud," she said, the womanly instinct to help setting aside everything else. "Come and unfasten his things. Has anybody gone for the doctor?"

"Yes, ma'am, Andrew Kidd."

Mary, about whose heart an awful dread was slowly creeping, did what she could for the prostrate and unconscious man, but her efforts were of no avail.

"We must just wait," she said, desisting at last, and she went out to the hall, where Claud stood staring vaguely before him.

"It is you who have done this," she said, and the high disdain in her face stabbed him to the heart.

"It wasn't all my fault. He egged me on, Mary," he said almost pitifully, "and I didn't know what I was doing."

She turned from him with a gesture of such immeasurable scorn that it flushed his white face redly.

"You might have given one thought to your dying mother," she said, harshly. "What am I to say to her when she asks for your father, as she has done twice in the last hour?"

"Is she really so bad?" he asked, hoarsely.

"She's dying, I tell you. The doctors don't believe she'll live till Eleanor comes."

Claud sat down upon the settle and covered his face with his hands. His wife turned from him, and left him to his own dark thoughts.



CHAPTER XXXV.

"TO HAVE EARNED YOUR APPROVAL IS MORE
THAN ALL."

FRANCES SHELDON spent the greater part of that day after her return from Annfield in the gardens at Castlebar. She seemed to be in a restless and curious mood, unable to fix her attention on one theme or object for more than the passing moment. She was in reality intensely miserable; she had tried to deceive herself with the thought that it was but a natural reluctance to go back to the monotonous routine of a life which contained little but work. She knew that never even on her visits to her home had such a strange, dull feeling of misery oppressed her. She had generally been glad of the rest and the holiday, but just as glad when the time came to buckle on her armour again. Till now Frances had been supremely content with her lot. She was not one of those who affect a cheap scorn of love and marriage; she did not belong to the Emancipated, though she knew many of them, and called them humbugs to their face; she had many good comrades among men, and more than one might have sought a closer bond than mere comradeship with the brave, bright, hard-working, happy-hearted girl, but she had never given the smallest encouragement to any man, simply because no man had

ever had the power to move her. She believed, and had often said, that destiny had ordered that she should go through life unattached. This brief visit to a quiet country home had passed like a halcyon dream. They had done their best to make her happy; the days had been filled with simple pleasures and out-door enjoyments; such society as they possessed she had been introduced to, and she had won golden opinions everywhere. Her bright, rare smile, her ready wit, her unfailing good-nature, and wholesome enjoyment of everything, had created a pleasant atmosphere wherever they had taken her. There was nothing but praise in the Kingdom for Mrs. Allardyce's young lady from London. And now it was over. To-morrow or next day would find her in the little flat at Barker Street; the lofty dining-room and laden breakfast-table, glittering with silver, and made beautiful with flowers she had gathered, wet with dew, with her own hands, would be exchanged for coffee and bread in the scullery beside the little gas stove, and lighted by an obscured window which looked out upon a dead wall.

How Frances did not despise her own home or her humble surroundings; but this glimpse of how bright life can be made for those whom fortune has favoured had revealed to her her own passionate enjoyment of such things, and this caused her a secret pain. For she knew that never again would life be quite the same to her. More than once that afternoon Mrs. Allardyce looked from the window, and saw her pacing the old-fashioned walks, touching a flower here and a tender leaf there, and observed upon her face a kind of sadness which touched her inexpressibly. These two women had been happier together than it is possible for me to express in words. They were exactly suited by temperament and disposition, and could have lived a lifetime together without jarring upon each other in the smallest degree. Frances had that fine and gracious gift more rare among our youth than aforesaid, of showing to those older than herself a quick and exquisite deference,

both in matters of opinion and experience. She was a woman of strong and quite decided opinions herself, but she respected those of others, and was ready to admit her own inexperience or liability to err. She was, in a word, one of the most lovable of women, except to such as were totally out of sympathy with her on every point. Then she simply held her tongue, and was dull, heavy, anything but the Frances Sheldon we have hitherto known.

They had talked of the affairs of Haugh all luncheon time, and speculated on the probable issues of Eleanor's return. It was now quite decided that Frances should remain at least another day. About three o'clock, having had her afternoon nap, Mrs. Allardyce sallied forth into the garden in search of Frances. She found her in the apple orchard, which was a mass of pink and white bloom, the soft turf under the gnarled old trees speckled with the sweet petals, and all the air filled with their odorous perfume. There was an old summer-house in the orchard, much dilapidated, but still affording a shelter from the sun, and there sat Frances with her chin on her hand contemplating the ground dolefully.

"Lassie, it's three o'clock," said Mrs. Allardyce, cheerfully. "Janet is making me a cup o' tea, for I couldna sleep, and I'm needin' it. Whether's you or me gaun to the station for the maister?"

"Is it three already? Dear Mrs. Allardyce, it is impossible. I only came out about five minutes ago."

"Nearly an hour and a half, my woman. Well, will ye go? I'm busy, and it's the last time, I suppose, you or he will hae the chance."

"I'll go if you like," said Frances; nor did her colour rise.

Mrs. Allardyce sat down beside her on the mossy seat, and laid her white motherly hand on the girl's slender shoulder.

"Lassie, it'll be an empty house the morn, or the next day, or whatever day you leave Castlebar."

Frances sprang up and dashed the bright drops from her eyes.

"Don't, Mrs. Allardyce; can't you see my heart's in my boots? I wish you'd tell me you're glad to get rid of me. It would make it easier. Perhaps I ought never to have come."

"Nay, nay, dinna say that. There hasna been as muckle sunshine in Castlebar this mony a day, an' ye will come back as soon as ye can."

"Yes, but not this year. I shall not be able to afford any more time, except a Saturday to Monday at home, and I'm jolly well off, I can tell you, to have had such a treat as this."

She threw her arms up and drew in a long breath of the scent-laden air.

"I shall see this picture in my dreams. It is Paradise, Arcadia, Heaven."

"Wheesht!" said Mrs. Allardyce, a trifle shocked.

"I am quite reverent. It has all the attributes with which I associate Heaven—peace, loveliness, harmony; they are blessed who dwell under your roof-tree."

Mrs. Allardyce looked at the bright, sweet, eager face, and the longing came to her to bid her stay always, to be the daughter of the house. She had only proved in these happy weeks how blessed may be the woman who, when she begins to feel age stealing upon her, has by her side a helpful, willing, and tender daughter, eager to relieve her from the burden and heat of the day. But she did not utter her unspoken thought, lest her speech might vex more than her silence.

"Had God seen fit to gie me a dochter such as you, bairn, maybe my cup had run over; but you'll no forget me in London ony mair than I'll forget you in Castlebar. Now, we'll to our teas."

The tension of that moment, when the pain of parting had lain upon them both sorely, being now over, they talked freely, happily, gaily, as usual. As they sat together a lady came to call, and it so happened that Frances had to drive in alone to meet Robert and bring

him home. It was not the first time she had done so ; he had taught her to drive, and his mother's pony was steady and reliable ; besides, Frances had proved herself so apt a pupil that she drove carefully and well. The long, white road winding between the tall green hedges was now so familiar to her that she knew every landmark ; a wayside cottage here, where dwelt a blind stonebreaker ; the cross roads, the gates of Haugh, the straggling outbuildings of a little home farm ; she knew them all, and now viewed them with eyes which had a mist before them. It is possible that she idealised that homely neighbourhood and its simple and kindly folk ; but it did seem to her to come nearer to the peace of Heaven than any place where she had yet dwelt.

The train steamed in while she was yet upon the brae, and Robert met her outside the village. His heart leaped when he saw her. She had been in his mind the whole day, and in the intervals of business he had been trying to solve a problem. He had loved Eleanor Kerr sincerely and truly, with something of a boyish passion which had thrilled his being, and it amazed him that he had so soon forgotten her. It was not yet six months since that wintry day they had walked together the dreary way between the villages, when she had repulsed and flouted the love which might have blessed her life. He had imagined then that he had received his death sentence, so far as love or married happiness were concerned, and lo ! he walked up the brae, in the sweet May sunshine, with heart beating and pulses throbbing wildly at the sight of another woman's face. Robert Allardyce was disgusted with himself. He doubted his own fidelity, his power to really care for a woman after the manner of his father, "to love one woman only, and to cleave to her." He only knew that the lithe, straight figure in the little carriage, the fresh, bright, interesting face, which the sunburn had warmed into almost a southern hue, were dear to him, dearer than Eleanor had ever been. And to-morrow she would be gone !

"I am sorry I am late," called out the clear, decided

voice. "A lady came in just as we were getting ready. Your mother was coming, too. Perhaps if I had not been here you would have had to walk."

"It would not have killed me," he observed, rather gravely. "You might drive home. I feel idly inclined; besides, I want to see if there are any faults to correct. I suppose it is the last time?"

"I suppose so," she said, gravely also, and with a gentle, skilful touch turned the pony towards home.

"I may not go to-morrow after all. I suppose you haven't heard. Mrs. Kerr has taken suddenly worse, and they have sent for Eleanor."

She turned her head deliberately, and looked him full in the face. He did not know what was in her mind, but he betrayed no emotion or embarrassment, only the ordinary concern such an announcement was likely to call forth in any one interested in the affairs of Haugh.

"Who sent for her?"

"Mr. Kerr. I went up to Annfield to say good-bye to Mrs. Claud, and he had just been; we drove down together. I think I shall wait another day. You see, Eleanor cannot possibly be here before half-past eight to-morrow morning, and I should like to see her."

"Certainly—it is only natural."

"Mrs. Allardyce makes no objection. Do you?"

She looked at him again, not coquettishly, though her question might have implied some coquetry, but he preferred not to meet her look. He sat back with his arms folded, his hat drawn down a little, and his eyes looking straight as a die along the white stretches of the dusty road.

"How could I possibly have any objection?" he asked, as stolidly as if the matter bored him to death.

"Well, I think you needn't be disagreeable over it," she retorted, promptly.

"Am I disagreeable?"

"Very much so; but pray don't apologise—it will make it worse."

"I suppose you are very glad to get away from us since we are such disagreeable people?"

"Who are we? I said you, didn't I? But what's the good of quarrelling now, when we've agreed so astonishingly all along? What I want to know is how I'm to settle down to work after all this?"

She gave the whip a comprehensive wave, which tried to take in the whole landscape.

"But you like your work, don't you?"

"Oh, yes! I make a virtue of necessity. But I have come to the conclusion that it is better to work straight on without a break, if possible, and if not, to make it as tame as possible—the break, I mean."

"Would you call this a tame break, then?"

She turned and looked at him again rather quickly and searchingly.

"What is the matter with you to-day? This is not the man I have been so friendly with all along."

"No, it's another man; but what about the break? I have known some—your friend Eleanor—who found existence in our midst impossible. The conditions of our life do not strike you as intolerable?"

"Eleanor is coming back to-morrow. You take my word for it, she has climbed down. Aren't you pleased at the prospect of seeing her again?"

It was a daring question, and her colour rose a little as she asked it.

"I am entirely indifferent. Why do you ask?"

"Pure cussedness," she answered unexpectedly; and he laughed.

"I have never met anyone in the least like you," was his unexpected remark.

"In what way? Do tell me, and be honest about it. There are hardly any honest people. I have some aunts in Lincoln who regard me as a species of wild woman. They talk of me with bated breath to others, though they are very outspoken to my face. They say they are honest; but I have found them mainly disagreeable. Do you wish to say something very disagreeable now?"

"You might fancy it so."

"Now, don't. I want to take only pleasant memories away, and when you are judging me after I am gone, Mr. Allardyce, remember the hard conditions of my life. It is a fighting life; and it must leave its mark behind."

"I judge you! God forbid; and if I did, it might be a judgment to please you. Have I then so poorly done my part that you are in doubt about my opinion?"

"You have been courteous and truly kind; pray forgive me," she said, and the hand on the reins distinctly trembled.

They were near home now, and an odd silence fell upon them. Frances felt it acutely, and tried to throw it off, but in vain. She felt for the first time not at her ease with this man. There was something in his face which disturbed her. Her gay chatter was stilled; she sat dumbly by his side, angry with herself and miserable, too, and wishing she were back at the grim round of her daily toil, which left no time to brood over personal feelings of any kind.

"I shall be glad to get back," she said, almost savagely, and more to herself than to him. "Hard work and poor fare—these are the best for Frances Sheldon."

"You have made me feel that I lead but a purposeless life here, sometimes," said Allardyce, suddenly, his mood changing. "I have often felt that you regard me as a good-for-nothing."

"Then you are wrong," she said, calmly—grave also. "I think you fill your station and responsibilities very well. You have won the respect and esteem of the neighbourhood in which you dwell; you live an upright, useful life; and your mother is the happiest woman, as well as the best, I have ever met. I do not see what more any man can ask."

His face flushed hotly. Her praise, so ungrudgingly given, was sweet as it was unexpected. He did not at once speak, nor did she look at him. Both felt that the moment was perilously sweet. They passed through

the Castlebar gate just then, and up the leafy avenue in silence still. Only when he assisted her to alight at the door did Allardyce speak, and then his words were few.

"To have earned your approval is more than you think—it is more than all," he said, not with passion, but with a grave earnestness which sank into her heart. His hand touched hers as he helped her out, and their eyes met. And both knew that after that there was no need for further words





CHAPTER XXXVI.

"AY OR NO."

FRANCES went very early to bed that night, and Mrs. Allardyce sat talking in her room till ten o'clock. Then she went down again to bid good-night to her son. In that placid and well-regulated household the lights as a rule were all out by eleven, unless Robert happened to have a more than usually interesting book, when he had been known to sit till dawn. He was not reading, however, but smoking, when his mother entered the little study, and the expression on his face did not indicate any special enjoyment of his pipe.

"Is there anything the matter with Miss Sheldon that she has gone off to bed so soon?" he asked.

"Nothing particular, I think. I want to ken what ailed you the nicht, my man, that you were so ill-bred in your ain hoose?"

"I ill-bred, mother! What in the creation do you mean?"

"What I say. You've never spoken a word the nicht. I suppose it's the thocht o' wha's comin' the morn that's tirl your tongue," she said, with some sourness of look and tone, for she felt more irritated with her son than she had ever been in her life.

"Sit doon, mother," he said, mildly, "and tell me what you mean."

"I've nae objections to sit down, but I havena patience wi' you, Rob. At the same time I wad be glad to hear what I may expect. Are ye to speir Eleanor whenever she comes back?"

"Ask her to marry me, do you mean? No, thank you; no woman, least of all Eleanor Kerr, shall have the chance to snub me twice."

"Then will you not ask her?"

"Most certainly not."

"D've no care about her ony mair?" she asked, leaning forward in eagerness, as if the matter were of vital moment to her.

"If you are very anxious to know, mother, you can set your mind at rest. I don't care for her at all, and I know now I never did very seriously."

"Oh, that's havers. She put ye aff your meat an' your sleep ony way, my man," said his mother, willing to admit anything in her joy. "I'm fella glad that ye are cured, for though I like Eleanor very well, and better than I did, I would not recommend her as a wife yet, at least, to any man. She's ower unstable. At the same time, I'm wae for the cratur. It's a bonnie mess she's comin' hame till; enough to mak' anybody's heart sair."

Claud, hungering for sympathy, had spent an hour at Castlebar that evening on his way home, so that they were in possession of all that had transpired that day at Haugh. Allardyce did not speak; not that he felt less keenly than his mother, but it was one of these painful family matters which are never mended or bettered by the speech or actions of those outside.

"Claud's a fool," was his comment, after a while. "But I'm sorry for him."

Mrs. Allardyce remained silent a little, and then got up to leave the room.

"Well, I suppose I may go to bed. We'll miss the lassie after she's awa, Rob. Blithe company she has been to me, at least."

"You seem to get on uncommonly well together," replied Robert, the queer look returning to his face.

"Why are you in such a hurry to your bed? I don't believe you'll sleep a wink now if you do go. Sit down, woman. I've a lot to say."

"What about?" she said, sitting down with an interested look on her face.

"Well, about myself. Did you know you had a fule for a son, mother? because if you didn't, you'd better begin to realise it now."

"He has whiles played the fule's part," she replied, with a sly smile. "But he's a' right at the bottom. But what has he been daein' noo?"

"Nothing. What for did you bring that lassie here, mother? I would wish her to bide for ever."

The flush of genuine joy sprang swift and red into Mrs. Allardyce's face.

"Well, ask her, then; ask her, lad. Maybe she'll bide."

"It would please you, then?"

"Please me? Maybe I hae prayed for it, lad; if not in words, in my heart, which my Maker has read. He kens what it is to be a mither," she said, in a voice which trembled.

"I would ask her, mother, but I'm afraid. You don't know what it is to receive a scornful No from a woman's lips. It takes all the pith out of a man; and this time it would go hard with me."

"Try it. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' She's worth the winning. She's after my ain heart, Robin; I couldna like her better were she my ain."

"But I shall have to tell her about Eleanor. No woman likes to play second fiddle."

"But she would be first, wouldn't she?"

"Yes, but it is such a short time ago. I even think shame of myself, because I'm off with the old and on with the new so quickly. Do you think it will last?"

"Your love for Frances, do you mean?"

He nodded, waiting anxiously on her reply.

"That's for you to decide; unless it is the love of a lifetime ye hae to offer, lad, I pray ye no to disturb the lassie's life. She's happy and content wi' her work;

but she's ane that will hae a' or naething; she kens naething about half measures. She's thorough in every way o' her life, an' she'll be thorough in this."

"Well, I'll try the morn," said Robert, and he seemed moved as he rose to say good-night. "Leave me now, and I'll seek the guiding you'll be seeking, I know, on your knees for me before you sleep. Oh, mother, this was your doing, and it's been my undoing."

"Na, na, the making o' you, my son, my ain lad," she said, stirred also by no ordinary emotion, and she gave him one of her rare kisses which were reserved between these undemonstrative folk for special occasions.

Mrs. Allardyce listened at the door of the guest chamber as she passed to her own, and hearing nothing, entered softly. Frances was asleep. Whatever care or anxiety might oppress her, it had no power to disturb her healthful slumber. It was a good face that lay upon the spotless linen in the peace of sleep; it looked innocent and tender, and very young. The motherly heart of Margaret Allardyce was stirred as she looked; she was amazed, indeed, at the hold this girl, so recently a stranger, had taken upon her affections already. Presently, as if conscious of the scrutiny of these sweet eyes, Frances stirred, and her lips parted in a smile. Mrs. Allardyce stooped and kissed her hurriedly, and stole out of the room; and Frances slept on, dreaming that her mother had come again, and was tending her as in the old childish days. Mrs. Allardyce was long wakeful that night. She had much to think of. The morrow would decide what was the greatest event in her life, since it would decide her son's lot in life and the future of Castlebar. She did not forget to lay this anxiety where the cares of a lifetime had been laid, before the God who was more of a loving Father to her than to most, because she lived in such communion with Him. It was dawn before she slept; but then her sleep was peaceful and refreshing as a child's.

Next day the bank was closed, which meant a day at home for Robert. There was a little restraint in the

atmosphere, and the talk flowed less freely than usual at the breakfast-table. Frances had made it a duty since she came to keep the flowers fresh and sweet in the house, and she went to her pleasant task that morning as usual. The daffodils were still tall and strong, and the white lilies stately and sweet in the borders; the spring flowers do not hasten their departure in these northern latitudes, but wait to welcome those that summer brings. So the task of filling the glasses was easily and quickly done, though she lingered over it longer than usual, as one seeks to prolong a pleasant occupation which has become a joy. Robert sat at his paper in the sunny window of the dining-room, and watched the alert, graceful figure moving up and down the garden paths, and the thought was in his mind what a pleasant place Castlebar or any home would be in which she dwelt. He had never felt so about Eleanor Kerr, and he was impatient over that boyish folly which he feared might stand in the way of the happiness he now desired, as a man desires the highest and best gift of life.

It was as he feared. Frances had not hidden from herself that she loved him, but experience of life had opened her eyes to certain risks, and these she fearlessly faced, as it was her nature to do. He found courage to speak that day when she had accompanied him to a little wood-crowned hill some distance from the house, from which a glorious view could be had of the Forth and its picturesque fringes on both sides.

"I am glad I came here," she said, as they reached the top; she flushed a little with the exertions of climbing. "I came by myself yesterday just to say good-bye to this lovely land."

There was a little bench beneath a scanty fir tree on the very summit, and she sat down on it, and turned her eyes seawards as she spoke.

He stood by her side, and knew his chance had come, but feared to use it, lest all his hope might be destroyed. For with the humility which characterises

all true feeling, he did not believe he had commended himself in any way to the woman by his side.

"But it is not good-bye for ever; you will come back," he said.

"Some day, perhaps, but not for long. It has been a pleasure too rare to bear much repetition," she said, frankly, and the words gave him new courage.

"You said yesterday you could suffer existence here. Will you come and make it happier for two who have learned to love you?" he said, and his own words sounded so poorly in his ears that he felt his cheeks flushing with very shame. Hers did not flush—he saw the colour receding from the rounded cheek, and she put up the hand nearest him with a little gesture indicative of nervous distress. But she never spoke. Then he moved a step, and stood straight in front of her, looking down from his tall height upon her with an eager earnestness which brought back the colour in a rich flood to her face.

"Frances, may I say it again? Will you come back as my wife to Castlebar? I am not good at expressing myself, only I know that everything is different since you came, and I cannot let you away unless you promise to come back."

She got up and walked away from the seat, and, somehow, he did not care to follow her. When she came back she was rather pale, but her face was resolute, and she did not let him see her eyes.

"There are some things I want to know," she said, a little unsteadily. "It seems a mean, pitiable jealousy, but you will tell me about Eleanor; what there was between you."

"Most certainly. It is your right. I had always cared for her in a sort of way, and it was expected by the Kerrs, at least, that we should marry. I asked her when she came from Paris in January, and she refused me; and that is all, except that I was more angry than hurt. It takes a man down a peg or two to be talked to as she talked to me. It worked an absolute cure."

"And you said nothing about waiting or asking her again?"

"Nothing. The thing was ended there absolutely, and for ever."

"In January. This is the nineteenth of May; four months ago."

She looked up at him as she said these words, and her face spoke more plainly than her words.

"You think I am in too much haste? I could not help it, having seen you."

"It is not so much that," she said, speaking with some little difficulty. "But, but I happen, unfortunately for me, to have seen a good deal of domestic unhappiness. I know many unsuitable married pairs. No, it has not soured me, but it has made me feel that the risks are great. You see it is not a situation one can give up when not suited; it is for a lifetime. It seems to me rather awful; doesn't it to you?"

"No," he answered, growing bolder as she objected. "It is not a question of risk where love is."

"Well, but you thought you loved Eleanor, now you think you love me," she said, with a calmness which amazed herself. "Perhaps in another four months you may think you love some one else."

He bit his lip, and his colour rose.

"You are very severe," he said, curtly, for the words stabbed him.

"I am entirely just," she replied. "We must safeguard ourselves. If I marry, I must be happy with no ordinary happiness, otherwise I should develop into a fiend. I have it in me."

"Then you will have nothing to say to me—in other words, you look on me as an unstable, vacillating fool, who doesn't know his own mind?" he said, bitterly.

"If that cap fits you, put it on," she said, flippantly. She was in a fighting mood, chiefly because her heart was aching intolerably. All the woman in her bade her throw prudence to the winds and accept this love, as the priceless boon she felt it to be, because all hers had gone

out to meet it. She saw his bitter face, and softened to him, though she had still strength to stick to her point.

"I think I am very strong to hold out," she said, presently, and for the life of her she could not keep back a cold, bitter smile from her lips. "I am a penniless girl; I have to work stupendously hard for a mere pittance. I have never lived in a house like Castlebar in my life. You might, at least, give me credit for unselfishness. I try to think what will be best for us both."

"For God's sake, Frances, hold your tongue! If you cared for me, you could not think of such things, much less say them."

"Couldn't I? Unfortunately for you, you know nothing at all about Frances Sheldon," she said, and something in her voice made him turn to her, and grip both her hands.

"Frances, look me in the face. Do you care for me, or do you not? I will have plain 'ay' or 'no' from your lips, nothing else."

She looked into his eyes, and her own did not falter.

"Come to me if you are in the same mind in twelve months, and you shall have your 'ay' or 'no,'" she said, simply.

"Twelve months—a lifetime! I will not wait," he said, passionately.

"You must," she replied. "In twelve months we shall both have time to know our own minds, and it is not much of a lifetime if it secures its true happiness."

"But you will promise not to allow any one else. Why, anything might happen in twelve months. It is an intolerably hard condition."

"If I can bear it, it ought to be easy for you," she said, involuntarily. "No; I will promise nothing, nor will I consider you bound in the smallest degree. As you say, anything might happen in twelve months."

"I will get my mother to plead—"

She broke away from him with a little unsteady smile.

"Your mother is wiser than you or I—she will not interfere. Now, let us talk of something else."



CHAPTER XXXVII.

"MY PUNISHMENT IS HERE."

ELEANOR slept but little as the train sped on through England in the quiet watches of the night. She had enough to think of; thoughts both bitter and glad chased each other through her busy brain. Uppermost was a feeling of relief that her brief, bitter experience of London life was over. Eleanor came back a wiser, humbler, better woman than she had gone away. She arrived in Edinburgh between six and seven, took a cup of tea at the refreshment bar, and then entered the slow train which would bear her to Kinghorn. There were few passengers—these chiefly workmen and early business men—no one Eleanor knew. She felt her excitement rising when she stepped on the ferry-boat at Granton and looked across the sea beyond Inchkeith, where the red roofs of the little town clustered on the shore. She had called it ugly, uninteresting, intolerable—now it seemed a wholly beautiful scene, bathed in the light of the morning sunlight that breathes the freshness of Eden. The place had not changed—only the scales had now fallen from the wet eyes of the woman who looked upon it yearningly, knowing it was home. By and by she saw the great house standing many-windowed to the sea, with the grass lying emerald green about its

base, and its trees waving in the summer breeze. Then Eleanor thought all in a moment of what the summons meant; she knew her father well enough to feel assured it was the last extremity before he sent for her. What if she should be too late? The thought stung her with an anguish so keen and intolerable that she could not be still, but wandered the deck restlessly, keeping her eyes fixed always upon the house of Haugh, until the boat bearing in upon the shore lost the view. She remembered, as she stepped out at the little platform at Kinghorn, that the two morning trains sometimes met, and also that Allardyce generally travelled by the one she quitted. She glanced swiftly up the platform, but he was not in sight: then she had to step back to her luggage, the porters regarding her with interest which had a touch of sympathy and pity in it.

"The carriage is there, Miss Kerr. We'll just take the luggage out."

"Who drives it?"

"The coachman—James Wilson."

No one, not even Claud, had taken the trouble to bid her welcome. She bit her lip. Perhaps it was what she deserved, but somehow it struck chilly to her heart. She walked out through the station, and up to the man in the box.

"Good-morning, James," she said, as if they had met but yesterday. "How is mamma this morning?"

"Not so well, or Mr. Claud would hae been down, Miss. She's had a bad night. The maister's just the same."

Eleanor did not comprehend his last words, but got into the carriage quickly, and they drove away, leaving the station folk and the few stragglers about to exchange comments on Miss Kerr's changed looks. Haugh was providing plenty of food for talk.

James Wilson drove cautiously and circumspectly up the brae. He had never been known to hurry, and would not whip up his horses to catch all the trains in Christendom. He was leisurely in his person and in his

movements, doing all things conscientiously and well, but in his own time, and declining to be worried by anybody. Eleanor was not in a mood to stand his slow speech, so she asked no questions at all as he drove. Mary was standing at the door, and Eleanor saw that she was white and worn, with the look of a person that had not slept. She seemed like to breakdown at sight of Eleanor.

"I am so thankful you have come, Eleanor, and in time," she said, as she helped her to alight.

"Is mamma really so ill?" asked Eleanor, in a rasping kind of voice.

"She is dying. She has only lived to see you. I'll send out Katie. James, just drop the things on the gravel."

She took Eleanor by the arm, and they walked into the house.

"Mr. Kerr is a little better this morning," she began, but Eleanor's stare arrested her.

"Why, what's the matter with him?"

In the press of care and anxiety Mary had forgotten that Eleanor could not possibly know what had transpired the previous afternoon.

"He is not quite well," she faltered. "You will hear about it afterwards. Come into the dining-room and take some breakfast first. You look as if you needed it."

"Not a mouthful. It would choke me."

"A cup of tea, then?"

"I had some at Edinburgh; no, I couldn't drink it. Can mamma see me now? Oh, Mary, I wish I had died when I was a little baby."

She leaned up against the carved stairway, and her look of hopeless misery was pitiful to see.

"Hush, dearie, you are needed here. I am in your place. I want to resign it; but you come to my room and lie down a wee bit, and I'll tell your mother. You must not be excited or crying when you go to her. She is so weak she cannot bear it."

Eleanor suffered herself to be led up to the room

Mary occupied. It was near Mrs. Kerr, only separated by the little sitting-room where she had spent so much of her time before she took to her bed. It was all familiar to Eleanor, yet it seemed strange; she felt like an alien and an intruder in her father's house, and her home-coming was more bitter than her heaviest imagination could have pictured.

Mary left her there a moment, and entered the sick-room. Mrs. Kerr was propped up among her pillows, wan and spent, yet with that waiting eagerness which indicated that her heart's desire had yet to be fulfilled.

"Yes, darling, she has come; she will be here immediately," Mary whispered.

"Do you think she might come now?" she said quickly to the nurse.

"Yes, certainly now."

Mary went back to Eleanor, who was sitting at the foot of the bed with her face hidden.

"I want to know what has happened to papa," she said, looking up. "Wasn't he well enough yesterday? The telegram came in his name."

"Yes, you'll hear by and by; your mother wants you now; come."

Eleanor threw off her hat and gloves. She was trembling violently, and felt that desperate desire to hesitate even yet. But Mary took her by the arm and led her to the door, and then left her, the nurse also going out by the other door, so that none witnessed their meeting. It took place in silence, for Eleanor only threw herself across the bed and hid her face on the pillow near her mother's head; and the frail hands of the dying woman had strength given them to be laid on that bent head in benediction.

"My lassie, my ain little bairn," she said in a whisper, then a dry sobbing shook Eleanor, and her heart seemed to break.

"Mother, mother, you won't die. I need you; I need you to forgive me, and to let me live for you now," she cried in a stifled voice, not daring to look up, for the one

glance at that ethereal face had smitten her to the heart.

"Look up, Eleanor, and let me see your face. I have hungered for it, my lassie, with that hunger known only to a mother's heart."

Eleanor raised her head, and spoke in the same stifled and broken voice—

"Oh, mother, I wish I had died when I was a little baby. I have never been any use or good in this world, and now, when I have learnt something, when I know what I am and what you are, you are going to die. I want to die, too."

"No, lassie, this is the very time you must live, for Haugh needs you sorely, and I see your father is stricken with a mortal blow. Oh, Eleanor, if folk would only let their love flow evenly through their lives and not save it all up till the last hour, when it can't do anybody good. I have sometimes misjudged him, Eleanor. I tell you frankly, because it may help you to understand him. I leave him to you."

"I will do my best, mother, if he will let me, but oh, stay and help me. We can't do without you in this miserable house."

"I said to your father, my lamb, that my death may do more good than my life. The Lord has strange ways of working, which we are not permitted to understand here—but I shall see clearly soon. It needed this to melt your heart and his, and maybe my memory may be the thing that will bind you together in love."

Mrs. Kerr spoke these words slowly, with great difficulty, and pausing almost between each one. But not one was lost upon Eleanor. They were the text upon which the whole fabric of her life would henceforth be built.

"You are not the blithe bairn that used to play in the Haugh fields," said the mother, with a great mournfulness. "But I see in your face something which was not in it when you went away. Ye have seen lie, bairn, and not life at its best."

"I have seen enough to teach me that I have been a

fool, and wicked, wicked, wicked," said Eleanor, with a great and bitter emphasis. "But my punishment is here. Oh, mother, mother, live!"

It was well that Alison Kerr was now past hope, else the strain of this interview must have tried her to the utmost. But all her earthly concerns being settled save only this, she was able to deal with it, and to meet the passionate outbursts of her daughter's stricken and remorseful heart with a gentle calmness marvellous to behold. It was as if some unseen arm upheld her; some voice of calm strength and fitness spoke in and through her; she seemed uplifted beyond the natural feeling which might have overwhelmed her.

"Listen, dearie; they tell me your father is not very well this morning, that he is not able to get up and see me; but I talked to him yesterday all that was needful. Perhaps later in the day he'll be able to come up. I want you to promise me that you will stay here for a year or two at least, and take care of him, and try to fill my place. That is all the atonement I ask. Will you make it, Eleanor?"

"Yes, mother, so help me, God."

"A little patience, a little gentleness and prayer; prayer makes everything easy, mind that, Eleanor, and I'll be near you when your heart is like to fail."

"It won't fail. I've a lot to make up to father, too. I'll do the best I can."

"And if the day ever comes when, without let or hindrance, you can be wife to Robert Allardyce, Eleanor, you will know that I am happier in heaven for that. I need not bid you be a good wife to him, for the good daughter makes the good wife."

Eleanor flushed deeply, touched to the heart even in her distress.

"And now I think that's all—except keep Katie Niven as long as there is bite or sup in Haugh, an' gie her what she deserves, for she has been nearly flesh an' blood to me since you went away, and she understands your father forby; and there's Claud and Mary, and

dear Margaret Allardyce; for ye will not want for friends." Her voice died away, and at that moment the watchful nurse slipped in and took her in charge. Then Eleanor, white-faced and beyond feeling of tears, crept back to Mary's room, and sat down drowsily on the top of the bed, and looked blankly before her. The foundations of the earth were shaken for her—she felt benumbed, stricken, incapable of thought or action. So Mary found her a few minutes later.

"Don't look like that, Eleanor. Take off your things and make yourself nice to go to Mrs. Kerr's room. Wouldn't you like to stay by her now?"

"I should, but it nearly kills me, Mary. Oh, don't you think God is punishing me terribly?"

"It is hard for us all, dear," Mary said, gently, and began to unfasten the buttons of her jacket.

"Hadn't I better see papa? What has taken him so suddenly? I never remember him having been ill."

"He was hurt yesterday," said Mary, with a kind of hard note in her voice. "I must tell you, I suppose, or somebody else will. Claud and he had a quarrel, and I suppose it came to blows, and your father fell, hurting his head."

"How awful, and mamma dying. A nice lot we are—aren't we?" said Eleanor, with a cold smile.

"Claud was not himself—he had drink; and if you saw him you'd be sorry for him. It'll be a lesson to him, I think," said Mary with difficulty.

"And is he seriously hurt? What does the doctor say?"

"He is anxious, I can see. Mr. Kerr has never regained full consciousness; and they do not really know the extent of the injury. That reminds me there is a surgeon coming from Edinburgh at eleven. I shall have to see that someone goes to the station for him."

"Where is Claud?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since last night."

"Haven't you? Are you at sixes and sevens at Annfield, too?"

Mary coloured.

I was sitting up with Mrs. Kerr till three ; then I lay down here. Claud was in the room with your father."

Eleanor said nothing as she laid her coat on the bed. The whole world seemed out of joint.

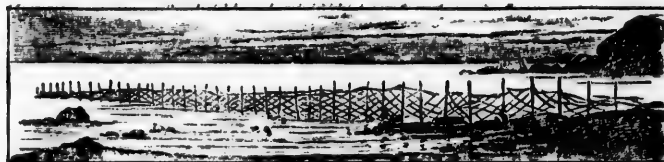
"Is Frances Sheldon at Castlebar yet, do you know?"

"I believe so. She certainly said she would stay until you arrived."

Eleanor nodded.

"Well, I'll wash and come back to mamma, Mary. If I could only lie where she is, and let her live for those who need her so desperately, I'd be a happy woman, instead of one almost in despair."





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"YET WILL I FEAR NONE ILL."

As Mary went down she met Claud on the stairs. He had tried to snatch an hour's sleep after leaving his father's room, but had failed. He looked so haggard and miserable that Mary's heart softened to him, and she held out her hand.

"You look wretched, Claud."

"I feel it," he answered, shortly. "Can I see my mother, and has Eleanor come?"

"Yes, she has been in; the meeting is over. I am glad of it. Will you go to the station for the doctor?"

"I don't need; Kilgour said he'd fetch him in his own trap; they'll discuss the case as they drive up. Do you think they'll both die, Mary?"

"I don't know; let us hope not. Mr. Kerr has a very strong constitution. He may pull through."

"He doesn't look like it. Have you told Eleanor?"

"Yes."

"And what did she say?"

"Not much. Go and see her, Claud; she's in my room."

He passed in without a word. He was too wretched to care, or even to notice the more kindly light in his wife's eyes. He looked upon himself as an outcast, almost a murderer. He knocked at the door of the

room, and Eleanor's voice bade him come in. When he turned the handle and looked in, she had her dressing-jacket on, and was brushing out her long hair.

"Oh, it's you, Claud; come in, and shut the door."

He did so, and they looked at each other a moment oddly, a little wintry smile on Eleanor's lips.

"A nice mess you've come home to, Eleanor," he said. "Do you really think mamma's dying?"

"I do."

She threw back her hair, and began to twist it up with a kind of nervous energy, which meant a good deal.

"We're a bright lot, we are," Claud observed, gloomily. "Can't think what we were born for. I suppose you've heard I nearly killed the governor?"

"Yes; we are, as you say, a pretty pair."

She put up her hair deftly in its massive coils, and then Claud saw that her face was thinner than when he had seen it last.

"You look as if you'd been down on your luck this while, Nell," he observed, with a kindly concern.

"So I have. Have you seen anything of Frances since she came to Castlebar?"

"Not much. They dined with us once or twice, and Mary's been down. They think no end of her at Castlebar; at least, Mrs. Allardyce. I don't think Rob's much gone on her. At least, he tightens up a bit when anybody speaks about her. I suppose she's rather advanced for him. Are you going to stay at home now?"

"Yes, if papa will let me," said Eleanor, with a little break in her voice. "Now, I must go to mamma. Have you seen her to-day?"

"No, I'm afraid to go in; but Mary says she doesn't know what's happened."

"No, and she must not be told. Mary has taken my place here, Claud—much better than I could ever fill it; still it hurts to see how completely she has become the daughter of the house, and how the very servants defer to her."

"But she won't seek to take your place now," said

Claud, eagerly. "Mary's uncommonly sensible, and she gives everybody their due. I'll say that for her."

"So shall I. I believe your wife to be as nearly perfect as a woman can be, and I hope you deserve her," said Eleanor, warmly. "Now I'll see whether nurse will let us in to mamma."

At eleven o'clock the great professor arrived from Edinburgh, and Dr. Kilgour with him. Their verdict was unanimous. Mr. Kerr was suffering from concussion of the brain, and his recovery, though probable, might be tedious and prolonged. Claud heard this with a relief it is impossible to set down in words. When Mary returned to the dining-room after seeing the doctors out, she found him sitting by the table sobbing like a child, and the sight disturbed her.

"Hush! Claud, it will be all right," she said, gently. "Don't give way like that. We need all our wits about us at a time like this."

"I can't help it. I've had murder on my soul, Mary, and there's no torture can come near to that. I wonder you can bear to come near me, or even to look at me."

"I have felt bitter against you, Claud, and we've both made mistakes; but we'll begin again. I have learned my lesson upstairs, perhaps you have learned yours down, and we'll be more forbearing with each other."

Claud rose, and his face wore a look of such yearning that his wife's eyes overflowed. She had spoken the words he needed, and at the right moment, and she saw his whole heart, and her own was touched to meet it. And when he clasped her to his heart, he felt that she was nearer and dearer to him than she had yet been, and a passionate gratitude surged in his soul.

"If my mother would live, Mary, there might yet be happiness in Haugh and Annfield," he said; but she only shook her head.

"She can't live, dear; it is only hours now, and we ought not to leave her; let us go up."

Before she left him she put her two hands on his shoulders and kissed him of her own free will for the

first time for weeks, and that kiss caused hope to blossom anew in the man's heart, and he registered inly a solemn and earnest vow for the future. Then they went back to the upper room, where Alison Kerr lay still and white, but with a peace ineffable on her face, awaiting the call into a larger room. She was now beyond speech, but her face brightened as her two dear ones entered; yet again she seemed dissatisfied, and they knew whom she missed, but neither of them spoke a word. So they waited by her almost in silence, till the feeble spark of life, now very low, should quite go out.

Early in the afternoon the Castlebar carriage came up the avenue, but stopped a little way from the house lest the wheels should disturb the stricken household, and Mrs. Allardyce and Frances walked up to the door. Mary went down to meet them; and Mrs. Kerr, though her eyes were now closed, seemed to divine that they had come, for her lips moved.

"Bid them come up," she whispered, with difficulty, and her desire was fulfilled. So it happened that those two, beside her own, were with her when the end came, which it did quite painlessly and silently about four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Draw up the blind," she said, quite suddenly, and in a clear strong voice. "It is getting dark."

The room was full of sunshine, but to please her they drew the blind up still a little way.

She looked round upon them, well pleased, for a moment, and then her eyes became wistful and seeking.

"Tell your father, bairns, I missed him at the end," she said to Eleanor, whose arm was round her. "And tell him we'll a' meet beside the throne. Sing the twenty-third Psalm."

They looked at each other, shaking their heads; there was that in their throats which would not let them sing.

It was Frances who first found her voice, and the sweet shrill notes of the dying woman mingled with it at first till strength failed, and she could only motion them

to go on. They sang it as they were able, faltering through their tears, and when it was over, Alison Kerr closed her eyes.

“Yea, though I walk through death’s dark vale,
Yet will I fear none ill.”

With these sublime words on her patient lips she fell asleep, as a child falls asleep on its mother’s breast, and those who watched with her could say nothing but “It is well.”

When Alexander Kerr came to himself he was lying in his own bed, and it was broad, clear day. He recollected nothing at first; and after lying still for some time trying to make out what had happened to him, he tried to raise himself on his elbow, so as to see the room. He had not strength to do that; but the movement he made put back the old-fashioned hangings a little, and enabled him to see that part of the room in which the window was situated. Someone was sitting there, a woman in a black frock, with her back to the bed, but the poise of her head was strangely like Eleanor’s. Her attitude was dejected; she leaned her chin in her hand, and seemed to be looking wistfully or mournfully out of the window.

Bit by bit, as he looked at her, the past came back to him. He remembered the urgency of matters which had caused the telegram to be sent; he remembered Claud coming up to Haugh, and the quarrel; there sat Eleanor now, and wearing a black frock, indicating, of course, that all was over. How long had he lain there, he wondered; and, being unable to attract Eleanor’s attention in any other way, he gave a deep groan. Eleanor sprang up and was at his side in an instant.

“Oh, you are better, thank God, papa; let me run and tell them,” she cried excitedly; but he tried to restrain her, speaking with difficulty.

“Sit down and tell me things. Is your mother away?”

She understood him in a moment, but only nodded, being unable to trust her voice.

"When?"

"This afternoon only, at four o'clock."

"How long have I lain here?"

"Since yesterday."

"Nae longer?—it looks like generations. So she's away? Aweel, ye can leave me, Eleanor, noo. I hae my ain thochts to think."

He turned from her deliberately, and she looked at him hesitatingly. At last she stepped without the door, and rang a little bell which would summon the nurse. To her she whispered that consciousness had returned, and then stole away from the room herself, leaving her in charge. She was so tensely strung up that she felt like a person on the verge of hysterics. She went in search of Mary, but could not find her anywhere; then remembered that she had said she would try to get a sleep. Everything had been done in Mrs. Kerr's room, and Eleanor felt moved to seek it to find there, if possible, some hush for her own fevered spirit. She was surprised, on opening the door, to see Claud, sitting quietly with his arms folded beside the bed. She closed the door softly and went up to him, laying her hand on his shoulder. The sheet was folded back from their mother's face, and she looked so lovely that they were held entranced.

"Poor mother, we might have made her happier, Claud—at least I might. There is no woe in this world like remorse."

Claud took her hand and held it in his big firm grip, and they felt very near to each other, like little children trying to comfort each other, and not knowing how.

"Papa is better, at least he has opened his eyes and spoken. Nurse says it is all right, but she has sent for the doctor."

"Spoken, has he?" Claud rose, excitedly, and began to move towards the door. "I must see him, Eleanor. I've been sitting here trying to think what it would be if he went away, too, and how I should feel."

She did not seek to keep him, sympathising in a

manner with the relief he could not hide. And when the door was shut, she, feeling no dread or shrinking, laid her head down on the pillow, and began to think of the past, first with its sad mistakes and many failures ; of the dark present, which seemed so heavy to bear ; then of the uncertain future which she feared greatly to meet. As she lay there, something of the great calm which filled the room touched her tired spirit, and after a time, being very weary, she fell asleep. And so they found her when all the light had gone, and the moonbeams were tracing their faint outlines across the walls and floor. Poor Katie Niven wept when she saw the pathetic attitude of her young mistress, and the big tears not dried on her lashes ; and though she had blamed her many times, both in her heart and by word of mouth, for the lack of loving duty to her mother, that sight seemed to sweep it all away, and she felt only for the girl's motherless and desolate state.

She took her gently by the arm and made her wake with a start.

"Miss Eleanor, supper is ready, and Mrs. Claud is getting up for it. You shouldn't stay here."

"Oh, it's you, Katie. I went in and fell asleep in mamma's room. It was so quiet and restful. Yes, I'll come down," she said, a little confusedly, and suffered herself to be led from the darkened room. Mary, already dressed, met them in the corridor.

"I've just been down seeing Mr. Kerr, Eleanor, and he is ever so much better. Claud is with him now. You poor dear, how miserable you look."

"I am not so miserable as I was. I've been asleep beside mamma, and it has made me feel better," replied Eleanor, and at that moment there was a knock at the front door. Katie Niven ran down, and Mary looked over the staircase to see who came.

"It's eight o'clock, Eleanor ; who can be coming now? Why, it's Frances and Robert Allardyce. Will you be there?"

"I'd like to see Frances again. Ask her to come up

here; will you, Mary?" said Eleanor, and went on to her room to refresh herself a little.

Frances came up directly.

"I'm going away to-morrow morning, and I wanted awfully to see you again, Eleanor," she said, as she entered. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, I want to see you, too, Frances; but must you go to-morrow? Can't you wait another day?"

"My dear, it is quite impossible, or I shall be paid off, and then where shall I be? I suppose you are lost to London and to me now?"

"My place is here, Frances; oh, how right you have been all through! You'll think about me; write often, won't you, and come sometimes?"

"The first two go for granted; I'll see about the last," said Frances, soberly. "Mrs. Claud tells me Mr. Kerr is better this evening. To devote yourself to him, that is your future, isn't it, Eleanor?"

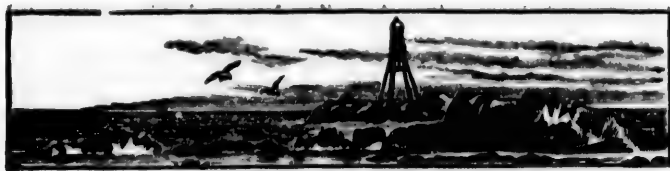
"It is." Eleanor said no more until she had sponged her face, and made her hair smooth and neat as usual. She looked more like herself, but still not as the Eleanor of old.

"You'll come down and see Mr. Allardyce, won't you? He has not seen you yet. I am sure he wants to."

"Yes, I'll come; is his mother there, too?"

"No; we've walked. It's a glorious night, and I enjoyed it thoroughly."

Eleanor listened with but a languid interest. Knowing Frances so well, she deemed her absolutely invulnerable where men were concerned, and never for a moment imagined that there could be anything but the merest friendliness between her and Allardyce. Frances, trying resolutely to put the thing away from her—to be loyal to herself for the next twelve months—till the period of the probation she had set should be fulfilled, was glad that Eleanor so looked upon it. There had been times when a certain qualm had visited her regarding Eleanor and this matter, but like many another she left it in the hands of that mighty arbiter of destinies, old Father Time.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

"A LIFETIME'S AN ILL RECKONIN' TO SETTLE."

LYING in his bed—not suffering except from exhaustion and prostration—Alexander Kerr of Haugh appeared to be a changed man. He was very quiet—saying little—but his manner of speech was gentler than of yore. To Eleanor it seemed unnatural. She could have wished sometimes some display of harshness or irritation, just to remind her that her father was still in the flesh. Claud and she spent a good deal of time with him, but he never alluded to two things—the cause of his illness, or Eleanor's sojourn in London. When he did not speak of them, they hardly dared. He seemed interested in the preparations for the funeral—giving the most minute directions regarding all the details, and supervising the list of the invited. But he seemed to avoid any personal allusion to his wife, and did not mention her name to either of his children. This strained atmosphere was trying for all concerned. Eleanor felt it all to be so unreal and painful that she would have welcomed anything to break it. He mended pretty well; but when he announced to Dr. Kilgour his intention of personally attending his wife's funeral, that gentleman was dumfounded, and promptly declined to give his consent.

"Then I'll go without it, my man," said Kerr, with a near approach to his old manner of speech. "So ye can keep your breath to cool your porridge."

"But the consequences," observed the doctor. "I won't be responsible."

"Naeboddy's asking ye to be responsible. If there be ony consequences it's me that'll hae to bear them. Ye can come in the coach wi' me, if you like, to be in readiness. There'll be room, any way, beside Claud and Allardyce and me."

There was no manner of use saying any more, Mr. Kerr's fiat having gone forth ; but the doctor went away shaking his head. Early on the funeral day Mr. Kerr got up without assistance, and unobserved dragged himself slowly and somewhat painfully, on account of his great weakness, upstairs to his wife's room. Katie twice had received his orders that the casket was not to be screwed down till he had been up—so he had his last look. But the face had changed since the evening Claud and Eleanor had looked upon its restored loveliness, and now looked what it was—the poor clay from which the spirit had fled—that marble face void of expression or beauty was not the face which had been wont to smile upon him, and he crept from the room miserable, chilled to the heart, feeling for the first time really the awful desolation that had overtaken his life. He turned the key in the door of his room when he reached it, and threw himself on the bed with a deep groan, realising in that most bitter moment all he had lost.

It was a sweet day for the burying of one whom so many had loved—a day soft and tender rather than bright, with a pensive radiance veiling sea and sky almost like a bridal veil. Not a breath of wind stirred the young leaves or disturbed the opal bosom of the sea ; and the waves broke so softly on the shore that their voice was like a lullaby. It was a great burying, long remembered in the place ; and when the long cortege came near to the little town, and wound its way down the

steep brae to the old churchyard, every mark of respect possible was shown in the place to which Alison Kerr had been true friend, wise counsellor, generous benefactor, to many. On account of the condition of Mr. Kerr, who had to be supported at the grave by his son and Robert Allardyce, the service was very short, and in a very few minutes all that was mortal of the mistress of Haugh was committed to the dust. Kerr bore himself calmly, his race and character forbidding any display of grief, but those who were near were not deceived, and said to each other afterwards, that, in spite of all the stories of domestic dispeace at Haugh, the Laird had gotten his death-blow. Allardyce left them at the churchyard, and Claud and his father drove back alone.

"Are you tired, father?" Claud asked, observing, as they drove up the brae, that his father leaned back in the carriage and closed his eyes. He asked the question hesitatingly, and with a kind of jerk. The Scotch undemonstrativeness was carried to excess among the Kerrs, at least among their men folk, and personal questions were only wrung from them by desperate circumstances.

"Tired?—no. What for should I be tired? Nothing ails me. Kilgour's aye spyin' ferlies," he said, shortly.

Claud did not speak for a moment, but in his present highly-wrought state of feeling long silence was impossible.

"He said he'd come up at tea-time and see how you were," he observed, lamely.

"He needna fash," Kerr answered, and there was silence again. Suddenly the old man sat forward and pulled up the drawn blind of the mourning carriage so that the sun shone in, then he turned to his son.

"We've lost oor best freen', Claud. I hae but one word to you, my lad, this, the darkest day o' my life. Gie Mary her due while she lives, an' dinna wait for death to show up your ill deeds."

Claud was silent—smitten into awe by these words, which seemed absolutely wrung from his father's lips. A something rose in him—a great yearning pity for the

old man's desolation, a craving to be something to him, to give of his strong young manhood to stay that bereft and stricken life. For the first time these many years the true son spirit stirred in him.

"Father," he cried, and his voice shook, "I've been an ill son to you; I will do better if you will let me—say you forgive me for what I did in the drink the other day. I'll be done with it from this day; I've sworn it by my mother's death-bed; and I'll try and be a better son to you."

"Weel-a-weel," said the old man, moved also, but keeping his emotion grimly down. "Your mother said her death would do more good than her life. If we try to be mair like her now that she's awa', it'll maybe please her whaur she is."

He said the last words heavily, and a great sob shook him, then Claud put his strong young arm around his shoulders and held him up, and so they drove through the Haugh gates to the motherless house.

Mary and Eleanor were in the drawing-room together, talking quietly, when they returned. They came right up; and Mary, with a little swift glance, which seemed to comprehend everything, rose silently and slipped away to seek Claud. Mr. Kerr threw himself heavily into a big easy-chair, and Eleanor regarded him with a strange mixture of feelings, moved as Claud had been, and longing, with all a woman's instinct, to comfort him. But he had so long discouraged any expression of affection or interest that she could not overcome her old awe of him.

"Ring the bell," he said, at length, "and ask Katie to bring the tea. I want something."

"Some wine first, father; you look so very tired," she said, quickly.

He shook his head.

"No, no—not the day; the tea will do all I want, and while she is bringing it, sit down. I want to speak to you, lass."

Katie Niven came to the door, got her message, and

withdrew. But Eleanor did not sit down. The time had come when she would be called to account for the doings of the past six months, and the ordeal made her feel nervous.

"I want to gang back a long way, Eleanor—to see whether I can understand what made ye run away."

He looked at her keenly from beneath his shaggy brows, and her colour rose.

"I can't explain it," she said, rather faintly.

"I grudged ye naething that I kent o'," he went on, slowly. "And yet ye never seemed like ither lassies—content or well-pleased. What was wrang? Did I fail in anything?"

For a moment the temptation was strong upon her to tell him what really had lacked—that loving sympathy and interest which forges between parent and child the tie which neither time nor death can break.

"Perhaps if I tried to explain you would not understand me," she said, with hesitation.

"I'm coontit gleg in the uptak'," he observed, drily. "Try."

"Well, it began when I grew up and could understand things and think for myself. I was afraid of you, father, even when I was a little thing."

"I never lifted my hand to you, I'm sure," he observed, quietly.

"No; but—but I stood in awe of you, and so did mamma; and afterwards, when I saw how it hurt her, I felt fearfully rebellious, and I determined that I would carve out a way for myself, and owe you nothing."

Kerr drew his hand across his eyes. Eleanor had not the finer feelings of Mary or of Frances Sheldon, or she would never have chosen this moment for her words, if, indeed, she had ever uttered them at all. But she felt that she was on her defence; and, besides, did not give her father credit for the deep feelings which were surging in his soul at the moment like a winter sea.

But he gave no sign that she had cut him to the heart.

"Well, and ye began queerly by wanting to change

my authority for that of a blackguard ye kent naething aboot. Have ye repented that folly?"

"Yes; you were right and I was wrong. I see things differently now. If I have learned nothing else in London, I think I have learned a little common sense," she said, unexpectedly.

"Ye've had a hard time o'd. That plain-spoken young woman Frances Sheldon telt me one day that you had to gang some days without your denner. Was that true?"

"Quite. That was the least of it," said Eleanor, the colour rising a little higher in her cheeks at the thought of her latest experience with Mr. Arthur Mallory.

"Well, and it's not so easy to get a livin' as ye thocht. Are ye gaun back to your occupation, whatever it was?"

Eleanor started, and a kind of sick feeling overcame her for the moment. The question was so totally unexpected, for she had settled down in her old home glad and grateful, even in the midst of its sorrows, for the creature comforts to be obtained under its roof-tree. What if, after all, her father had only yielded to her mother's dying wish to please her, and now that she was gone would none of her?

He watched her narrowly, and saw that she was upset.

"I thought I might stay," she said, falteringly. "That, perhaps, now mother is away, I could be of some use."

"Haugh is the same place as it was, Eleanor, an' I'm nae better. Nae, I'm gettin' aulder, an' temper doesna mend wi' age. Ye'd better think weel o't," he said, in quite a matter-of-fact voice.

Eleanor stood by the mantelpiece, with her hand on the white marble, whose hue it matched. She looked very slim and slender in her black gown, and her face was the face of a woman who had tasted of life's reality.

Her father, with the slow, close observation of his race, took in every detail of her appearance, and felt a great pity for her and for himself. For they knew very little

about each other after all ; it was like beginning a new life with a stranger.

"Mamma thought I should stay, papa. She bade me—bade me take care of you and comfort you."

"It'll be a hard task, my wumman, now she's away from Haugh," he answered, sadly. "But ye are welcome to try. I can but say to you, lass, as I said to Claud as we drave hame, if ever you marry, do your duty ilka day ye live, for a lifetime's an ill reckonin' to settle, when Death's waitin' at the door. Is that Katie wi' the tea?"

He sat forward and asked the question with a touch of irritation, because he felt his feelings gaining the mastery, and it was against his whole nature and creed to allow it.

Katie did come in then noiselessly, put the tea-tray in its place, and asked if she should tell Mr. and Mrs. Claud. Eleanor nodded, and she closed the door. Then the moment being come, Eleanor knelt down by her father's chair, and leaning her arm on his knee, forced him to look at her.

"Father, I want to know you, to make you love me. If you wil! forgive me first, I'll try, oh so hard, to fill—no, not to fill mamma's place, for nobody can do that, but only to try and be a little like her."

Then she laid her head on his knee, and he bent over her, and two big tears fell from his eyes and touched her neck.

"Bairn, bairn, God forgive us," he said, huskily. "We hae missed a heap."

The young May moon rose that night in a cloudless sky, and the stars were radiant with hope. The faint white light fell mystically, beautifully upon the old house of Haugh, making a glory on the smooth lawns, and flooding the dark windows with the light of Heaven. It softly touched the sea, making a wondrous pathway, which seemed to stretch far away into the infinite. But most tenderly of all it lay upon the new-made grave where they had laid the dear mistress of Haugh to her rest. She was gone, but the benediction of her lie

remained. She had borne the burden and heat of the day, and in times hope had grown weary and faith failed. But now all things were made plain to her opened eyes, and in Heaven, I doubt not, a new joy was added to her faithful heart, because peace, hope, and love now sought abiding place in the home she had left.





CHAPTER XI.

"YE ARE YOUR MITHER'S BAIRN."

FRANCES SHELDON and Adrian Brabant walked in Hyde Park on a Sunday afternoon in May. Not being fashionable people, they were too late for church parade, but there were plenty of bright, well-dressed, happy-looking people enjoying the delicious air and the fresh-green loveliness of that exquisite day. Fortune had smiled on Adrian Brabant, and he was now spoken of as being in the very front rank of modern dramatists. He had no longer to solve the problem of how to live on nothing a year, but had enough and to spare for his simple wants, and he had given to his mother her heart's desire, a flat in Paris, where she could live comfortably, knowing that her debts would all be paid. Certain conditions Adrian had prudently laid down, for Madame had extravagant ideas, which a long spell of absolute poverty had not much modified; but having found him very firm regarding needless expenditure, and more especially the incurring of debt, she did her best to keep her expenses within stipulated bounds. Adrian ran across occasionally, but his heart and his home were in London. He had a little suite of rooms in King Street, St. James', and there lived according to his own simple ideas. As for Louis, he was as of yore—idle, shiftless, dissipated when he had the wherewithal, not ashamed to

sponge off his more fortunate, because hard-working, brother, who was very generous with him, but absolutely refused to let him share his home and life. This was no more than necessary and right, though Adrian had sometimes a hard struggle to maintain the privacy of his own abode. He had a good many friends, but there was none he more sincerely regarded than Frances Sheldon. He often took her out on Sunday afternoon, and her outings with him were the oasis in the desert of hard-working life. One year had passed since her visit to Castlebar, and during these long months she had been absolutely loyal, writing only when obliged to Mrs. Allardyce, but in no way seeking to foster or increase the regard which they had entertained towards her. To Eleanor she wrote often, and she knew very well how things were at Haugh and at Annfield, since Eleanor kept nothing back from the woman who had befriended her in her most bitter need. It had been a probation for Eleanor at Haugh likewise, and she had stumbled often by the way. For, though her father had forgiven her, and tried to do his best towards her, there were many times when the strong wills clashed, and the scent of battle was in the air.

"I had a letter from Eleanor yesterday," said Frances, as they sat down under a spreading chestnut, after wandering into the deeper shade of Kensington Gardens.

"And how is she?" Adrian asked, deeply interested always.

"Quite well; she sends her remembrances to you, and is talking of coming next month to pay me a visit. It will be very fine to see her again."

"It will. She gets on all right at home?"

"Pretty fair. They are not angels, you know, and there have been one or two perilous moments. But I think they begin to understand each other, and that, after all, is the true secret of all relationship, isn't it?"

"Yes. So she is coming to London, is she? Will you not go to Scotland this year?"

"I may, and I may not," said Frances, and her face became grave, and a curious wistfulness gathered in her eyes. She was unaware that she had thus revealed her heart-sickness, but Adrian saw it, and inwardly wondered. More than once of late he had detected in the girl for whom he entertained a chivalrous feeling of respect and friendship a certain restlessness, a vague discontent, which displayed itself rather tacitly than in words. And it had cost him more than one anxious thought.

"I think I need a change. That one dip into the lap of luxury last year altogether demoralised me, Adrian, and I have more cause to hold myself up as an awful example to my compeers. I think I shall go home next Saturday to learn a lesson in homely contentment from daddy and the rest. The gilly-flowers will be out by then, I should think. Did you know gilly-flowers could preach? There is a whole bed of them in the Vicarage garden. Daddy says they teach him all the summer through a perpetual lesson in sunny contentment."

"You certainly look as if you needed a change. Several times of late I have imagined you looked more tired than usual," said Adrian, kindly.

"I've no business to be tired; for I am perfectly well, and I am not killed with work—driven like a galley slave, as I used to be. I've lost heart, friend; that's what's the matter with me."

He did not like to ask why, believing she would tell him if she felt moved to it.

"We all do sooner or later," she said, more lightly, drawing an impossible figure with her parasol on the bare ground under the tree; "it's not our fault, but a question of sex. Suppose we go home now and have tea."

"To Barker Street, do you mean?"

"Why, of course. I invested in a whole cake at two shillings yesterday, so you had better come and help me to eat it; then we'll go to the City Temple at night, at least I shall."

She sprang up and opened her sunshade to the sun.

They were quite silent as they crossed the soft turf to Oxford Street, and climbed to the top of a 'bus, where the air blew about them freshly. But soon Frances found her tongue again, and talk flowed freely as it should between old friends.

It was nearly five when they reached the little flat, and the porter handed Miss Sheldon a card.

When she read the name a flush burst all over her face like the sunset glow.

"He said he'd come back, miss, at six o'clock," the porter volunteered. She nodded, and as they moved on upstairs, Adrian pondered on that blush.

"That is one of my Scotch friends," she observed, carelessly, handing him the card as she put her latch key in the door. "Will you stay and see him?"

As it was put in the form of a question rather than expressed desire, Adrian prudently declined; and there was such a large wonder in his mind that he could scarcely bring himself to ordinary speech as they had their simple meal.

"You will have a great deal to say to each other, so I shall not stay," he said. "I half-promised the Rickmans to dine there to-night. Their hour is eight on Sunday, so I shall just have time to get down. You'll excuse me going rather hurriedly."

She said she would, and Adrian saw that she did not know very well what she did say; and he told himself, as he went downstairs, with a quiet smile on his lips, that he had been a fool and blind not to suspect all along what ailed her. He met Allardyce in the doorway, and gave him a keen look. The study of human nature was his business, and that open, honest face, which bore the seal of an upright life, and of a conscience at peace with God and man, pleased him well. He walked along the quiet street breathing an inward prayer for the welfare of both, and his own heart was touched by a feeling of kinship with them, though he knew it was ordered that he should walk through life a solitary and lonely man as far as the ties of wife and home were concerned.

Allardyce took the shallow steps in a few bounds, and his knock at the door had all a lover's impatience in it. Frances opened the door to him, and bade him come in, very quietly, and in the little sitting-room they regarded each other in absolute silence for a moment.

"Well, I've obeyed you," he said, and she saw the hunger in his eyes. "I've stopped away twelve months to the very day."

"I thought it was longer," she said, whimsically, and her voice was very low.

"What have you to say to me now?" he asked, anxiously, but with a note of triumph in his voice, for her face and her eyes answered him. It was lovely with that look of tenderness which he alone had power to call forth.

"Are you of the same mind still?" she asked.

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't be here, on a Sunday, too; but I had to come on the very day. Perhaps you've changed your mind?"

"Perhaps I have. Does your mother know you have come?"

"Yes, her letter is in my pocket; but I didn't come to talk about her, but to ask when you are coming to Castlebar."

"Are you sure you've thought of everything, counted the cost? I've sometimes called myself one of the emancipated. Are you prepared to have an emancipated wife?"

"I don't care what she is as long as she is you, Frances."

"All right," she said, soberly; but there was that in her eyes which made him glad. "You take the risks, and I'll come."

Eleanor Kerr, sitting idly by the drawing-room window, saw the Castlebar phaeton coming up the avenue, being driven in a leisurely manner by Mrs. Allardyce, attired in the usual poke bonnet and capacious driving cloak. Fashions might come and fashions might go,

but year in and year out Mrs. Allardyce wore the identical driving costume, and it seemed part of herself. She had a kind of odd look in her face that day; Eleanor noticed it a long way off. It was Tuesday afternoon, and she had seen none of the Castlebar folks on Sunday, so that she felt specially pleased to behold the familiar figure in the familiar little carriage. During the past year Mrs. Allardyce had exercised a motherly supervision over the motherless girl, and a very genuine affection now existed between the two.

"Katie, here's Mrs. Allardyce; make some more tea, for she hasn't long if she's to meet Mr. Robert at four o'clock," she cried, as she ran downstairs to meet her old friend, welcoming her with more than usual heartiness.

"It's ages since I saw you. Where were you all on Sunday? We never got a pcep at you."

"I wasna oot. I took a quiet day wi' my Bible at hame—my son being awa'."

"Away, was he—where?"

"A long journey; but come up and I'll tell you about it. I've come on purpose."

Eleanor took her cloak, hung it in the hall, and they went upstairs together.

"You're lookin' weel, Eleanor; mair like yoursel' than ye've been for lang. Father weel?"

"Quite; but I know him failing a little, Mrs. Allardyce. He's glad to come in of an afternoon, and sit quiet for a little; but he's very well."

"Weel, he's ageing, like some o' the rest o's. It's a year the day, my dear, sin' she gaed awa'. Ye've been in my mind a' day, though I hae had my ain concerns to think on, too."

"Yes, a year. Sometimes I can't believe she is away; at other times it is as if she had never been here; as if I had only dreamed I had a mother," said Eleanor.

"Ah, but she's no far awa'; the veil that hides them from us doesna hide us frae them; that's my comfort when my heart's empty, as it is whiles even yet; and I want to tell you, Eleanor, that ye've done your duty wi'

the best o's, an' that ye are earnin' the respect o' a haill countryside. Eh, lassie, if your dear mother had but lived to see this peace in Haugh ! "

" Do you think papa is pleased ? " she asked, wistfully. " He does not say much, and often we have little tiffs. "

" He's mair than pleased, lassie ; he's no faur frae greetin' whiles, an' that's a lot to say for Kerr of Haugh. Gang you on, an' ye'll no miss your reward. Ye are doing a woman's noblest duty in this world. An' now, are ye for my news or no ? "

" Of course I am, " said Eleanor.

Katie brought in the tea then, and Eleanor rose to pour it out.

" Weel, Eleanor, my son's tired o' the auld mistress o' Castlebar, an' has gane to London to seek a new ane ; who think you ? "

Eleanor stood quite still, a piece of sugar balanced in the tongs, and her face white as the linen of the cloth before her eyes. Margaret Allardyce was a very shrewd woman in most things, but she had not the faintest idea that Eleanor took other than the most ordinary interest in her son. Eleanor knew that, and all her pride rushed to her aid, and she forced herself to careless speech.

" Not Frances ? "

" Yes, Frances. Maybe she has told you, dear lassie, how she has kept him hangin' on whole twelve months, havin' kent o' his auld fancy for you, an' anxious to gie him the chance to make sure o' his ain mind. But he has never swithered one way or anither, but coontit the days till the year was up ; an' awa' on Saturday night, let me say what I liked, and I've my letter this mornin' that it's a' settled ; and so there'll be bonny ongauns in Castlebar this summer, eh ? "

Mrs. Allardyce was garrulous in her supreme satisfaction, and so gave Eleanor ample time to recover herself. She was able out of pure strength of will to turn to her—handling her tea-cup with fingers which did not falter.

" You liked Frances very much, I think, and got on

with her. She is a splendid girl," she said, calmly, and Mrs. Allardyce nodded appreciatively.

"I'm glad you're pleased, Eleanor. I thocht ye would be. I've had many an anxious thocht about the guid-dochter I nicht get; an' the Lord's been better to me in this than I deserve, as He has been in a' else."

Mrs. Allardyce talked on, pleased with her theme and her listener, not noticing that she was singularly quiet. She stayed quite an hour, and Eleanor went down with her as usual and put her into the little carriage, and what was not usual at all, she leaned forward and kissed her twice.

"Once for yourself, and once for Frances," she said with a little smile. "Tell her when you write."

Mrs. Allardyce nodded, beaming all over, and drove away, quite unconscious that in the meantime the light of life had gone out for the girl she left standing apparently so calm and undisturbed on the doorstep of Haugh. She stood quite still and watched the phaeton out of sight. Then her eyes came back to the green lawn, where one or two swallows were drooping their graceful wings, brushing the daisies lightly in their flight. Then away through the trees she saw her father come, and even from where she stood she noticed the droop in his shoulders, and that he walked less steadily than before. And her heart went out to him in a rush of tenderness; and she said to herself, in a whisper, that the way of duty need not be all hard. She turned about rather quickly and sped upstairs to the room which had never been occupied since her mother died, but remained as she left it, sacred to her memory. It was Eleanor's pleasure to keep flowers in it continually, and she often came there when her spirit was ruffled and she felt the need of peace. She closed the door and held out her hands blindly, and her whole face changed.

"Mother! mother!" she cried, brokenly, and throwing herself across the bed gave way for a moment to the bitter desolation which surged in her soul. Her heart had awakened too late, and the treasure it had once

spurned had been given to another. Well, perhaps it was but her deserts, and yet—

Alexander Kerr came slowly across the fields, pausing often and looking about him. The fields smiled as they had done a year ago, and all things seemed the same, at least they wore the same outward cloak; but the world was different to him. During that dreary year he had made what atonement to his wife's memory was possible to him, and many spoke of the great change in Kerr of Haugh, and his name was uttered with more respect than of yore. His face had aged; it was rugged and strong still, but more gentle in its look, as if he kept guard upon himself. He paused a good many times as he came near to the house, and when he got to the door Eleanor met him, and a smile passed between them.

"You look tired, father. Where have you been?"

"At the kirkyard; the lilies are in bloom, and it's a bonnie spot."

"I wish you had taken me with you," she said, quickly.

"Anither day we can go thegither," he said, not ungently. "Will they not be down frae Annfield the day?"

"Yes, after baby has gone to bed. Mary is a devoted mother."

"An' Claud a model father. *She* wad be pleased, maybe, were she to come back."

There was infinite pathos in these simple words. Eleanor's eyes filled and overflowed.

"You miss her very much, dear papa. Do I fill her place very poorly?"

Her heart was hungering to hear that somebody had need of her, that she was of some use in the great wide world.

Kerr turned to her and put his arm about her shoulders.

"Ye are your mither's bairn to me, Eleanor. I can say nae mair nor that. But for you, life would not be possible to me in this place."

THE END.

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